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NOVEMBER 2007



Public Immunity

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By EVE FISHER

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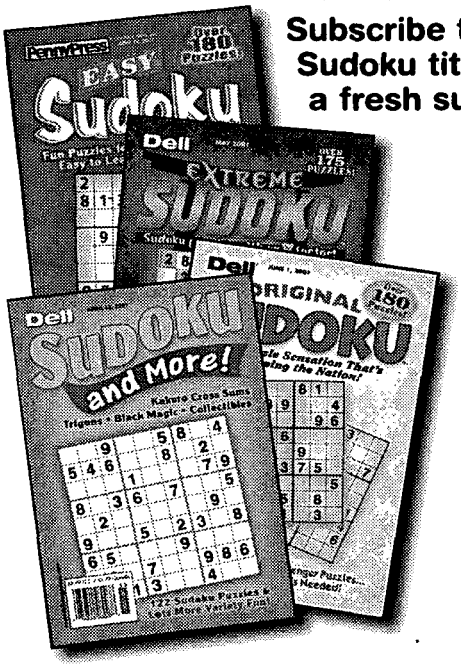
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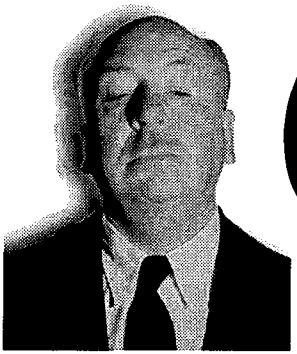
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

THE BEST REVENGE . . . IS A GOOD STORY

Like a well-crafted short story, an artful act of revenge is the culmination of thought, patience, and effort—and as several of this month's stories demonstrate, the result may (or may not) be a moment to be savored. Rhys Bowen's story "Killing Time" is an especially delightful morsel in that respect, showing how one type-A character learns (the hard way) the patience of Job. William Link's "Account Closed" likewise explores the topic as a father, watching his daughter's killer, rots from the inside with the desire for revenge. And in "Of Wax and Watermarks," R. T. Lawton's down-on-his-luck Chevalier leaves no slight unavenged in pre-Revolutionary Paris.

The possibility of revenge as motive runs through the investigation of the death of a wealthy ne'er-do-well in "Public Immunity," our cover story this month, but author Eve Fisher takes notions of vengence and culpability in an unexpected direction.

Also this month, we welcome the return of Douglas Grant Johnson and his Depression-era mechanic Cliff, who applies a bit of pluck and sleuthing when a customer fails to return one evening in "Cliff's Folly." Aboriginal Liaison Constable Leonard Smith also returns this month, investigating a case of suspected domestic abuse in the Aboriginal Outback of Australia in Rex Burns's "Homestead."

And did somebody say "ghosts"? In time for Halloween we offer two stories with supernatural suggestions. Our mystery classic this month, "The Judge's House" by Bram Stoker, is sure to send chills down your spine. Terence Faherty's story "The Last Ghost of Strachan Island" is a little subtler, but no less eerie. New to AHMM, Mr. Faherty won a Shamus Award for Best Private Eye Novel in 1998 for *Come Back Dead*, featuring his Hollywood P.I. Scott Elliott. Welcome!

Revenge: It may be justified, or not. It may be successful, or not. It may be exacted in the heat of the moment or, proverbially, best served cold. But whatever the circumstances, it is always a fine engine for a gripping story.

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THE LAST GHOST OF STRACHAN ISLAND

TERENCE FAHERTY

Philip Sibley wasn't the first of the party to speak of ghosts in connection with the old carriage house on Strachan Island, but he claimed the first real encounter. He and his wife Beverly were one couple of three who had rented the former stable, which had been converted to a "luxurious vacation opportunity." The couples were all flatlanders from Indiana, all successful professionals, not people prone to seeing ghosts. They'd come to the Georgia coast to play golf, to swim laps in the carriage house's brick-decked pool, to drink frozen margaritas in the hot tub.

But at the first sight of the old house, Heather, the very young and very blond second wife of Nelson Pierce, had said, "Great place for a ghost story."

The carriage house was all that remained of a Gilded Age estate built by a shipping magnate named McPherson in 1879. McPherson's great house, Shore Cottage, now resided on a neighboring island, moved there by barge shortly after its hundredth birthday. Beverly, a petite, dark-featured librarian, found a photograph of the floating house just inside their rental's first floor great room. It showed the building far out in Strachan Sound, its second floor windows and long front porch giving it a face not unlike that of the tank engine on her favorite nephew's favorite television show. To Beverly, the house looked sad and perhaps a little mortified. All the picture needed, she decided, was a four-fingered hand in a cartoon glove waving good-bye.

Behind her, Dial Ward, a tall, slender architect, and her tall, stooped, architect husband Willard were explaining to the others that the entire first floor of the carriage house had once been stables, the big square openings in the brick walls—filled now with bay windows on the street side and French windows on the side

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Hank Blaustein

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that faced the pool—once holding the stable doors.

Thank God, Beverly thought, we have a pair of professionals along to unravel that mystery for us.

The second floor had been servants' quarters, in the opinion of architect and nonarchitect alike. It was reached by a creaking staircase whose railing was anchored by heavy posts decorated with horse-head reliefs and much scarred by the passage of suitcases. Upstairs, the creaking was taken up by the dark hardwood floors and echoed by the three-inch boards that paneled the white walls and ceilings.

Nelson, a balding and florid man who was the editor of a business magazine, found a particularly noisy board and rocked his considerable weight on it. "Not a house where you can have sex with a clear conscience," he said.

Show me a house where you can, thought Beverly, whose husband had lately refused even to discuss children.

Two of the bedrooms were small and shared a bathroom that had a claw-foot tub on a raised platform. "For additional inconvenience," as Heather, a real estate agent, phrased it. The third bedroom was a suite with a sitting room, fireplace, and a private bath.

The disparity in bedrooms created the problem of deciding which couple would get the master suite. Beverly stepped out onto the balcony that served all the bedrooms and overlooked the pool. She didn't want to take part in the negotiations or even hear them. She knew they would go on until Philip, a lawyer, balding like Nelson but with skin as pale as hotel sheets, had secured the room for them. The other couples knew it as well and surrendered after only a token resistance. Beverly was embarrassed, but the sight of the master's sitting room—a library, really, with two walls of books and a writing table—eased her pain.

It was late by the time they'd settled their things, too late to grocery shop and cook. They walked the two blocks to the little town center to a restaurant recommended by a publisher friend of Nelson's. Beverly, serving as rear guard, marveled anew at the thinness of Heather's legs, so thin they made her knees look rheumatic. Beverly suspected that Heather was avoiding the unforgivable sin of Nelson's first wife, Molly, who had grown almost as fat as he was in the process of bearing him two children. Sure enough, for dinner Heather ordered a dry side salad. Beverly had a grouper sandwich with fries.

On the way back to the house, they saw a sign for the Strachan Island Ghost Walk. The bright green sign featured a black silhouette of a ghost and stated that the walk began every night at nine from the foot of the fishing pier.

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"Our house is on that tour," Heather said. "I'd bet my Gucci sunglasses."

Nelson said, "We should find out what time they go by and pop out in sheets."

"They better not be peeking in our windows," Dial said.

"Not at these prices," her husband added.

Philip said nothing, which surprised Beverly. He rarely let the last word be spoken in someone else's voice. She put it down to the wine he'd had with dinner.

Back at the house he seemed preoccupied, begging off on the euchre game and going out to the pool with his cell phone. Beverly watched from the shadows of the balcony as he paced back and forth, speaking in whispers but nodding and gesturing as though he were shouting. These private phone calls were growing more frequent, and Beverly wondered if Molly Pierce had noticed a similar pattern before being jettisoned.

Philip insisted on turning in early, thoughtfully suggesting that if Beverly wanted to read, she try the love seat in the little sitting room. She did, trading her paperback for a typescript she found on the mission desk, a history of the property. The history began with a plantation that predated the McPhersons by almost a century and a half. It had been abandoned in 1863, when the Yankee navy had claimed the island, liberating its many slaves. Even with that potentially exciting incident, the manuscript was deadly dull, being more concerned with property lines and deeds than people. It grew more so during the period between the departure of the Federal troops and the arrival of the robber barons, equipped with steam yachts and anxious for cheap winter estates and solitude. McPherson had been one of these, but by the time he sailed onto the scene, Beverly's head was nodding.

She set the manuscript aside and slid back the pocket door that had shielded Philip from her reading light and the crash of pages turning. By the light coming through the open bathroom door, she saw that he'd been further protected by the foam earplugs he invariably wore in hotels and which she invariably found on the floor or in between the sheets in the morning. She also saw that he'd left his cell phone on the nightstand next to his glass of water. Beverly was tempted to slip the phone into the bathroom and check the last number dialed. Instead, she crossed to her side of the bed, climbed in without disturbing his regular breathing, and went to sleep.

She awoke a little before six to a very quiet house, the only sounds the calling of birds and the rhythmic whoosh of the ceiling fan. She changed into T-shirt and running shorts in the bathroom and

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slipped out to walk the island's beach. Its narrow and fleeting beach, according to the research she'd done after Philip had announced the location of this year's golf trip. She'd learned that Strachan Island had the most dramatic tidal swing of any place on the East Coast. For half the day there would be no beach at all, and only twice a day, at low tide, would there be very much.

That morning there was a hard-packed fifty feet of sand. Beverly walked to the fishing pier and beyond it to the lighthouse. It was a replacement lighthouse, she knew from her reading of the night before, the original having been blown up by the Confederates when they'd abandoned the island. On her walk, she saw a pod of dolphins, surfacing and diving in a regular, lazy rhythm, and a flight of pelicans in follow-the-leader formation. A woman walking toward her pointed to the surf at Beverly's feet, and she looked down in time to see a shark fin slicing through a wave. The fin was pale gray and no bigger than her hand. The tiny shark circled, and Beverly saw a flash of bright blue, a crab scuttling for its life. Then the shark closed in, using all but the foamy leavings of the waves, and the crab was gone.

The carriage house was still quiet when she returned. She carried the newspaper she'd purchased in town up to her husband and found him sitting, fully clothed, on his side of the unmade bed. He was waiting for her, Beverly realized. Lying in wait for her.

She remembered with a hot flush of guilt her impulse to check his cell phone, but when he said, "Did you do this?" his tone was more anxious than accusing.

He pointed to the nightstand next to him. It held the phone, a now empty water glass, and a lamp. The lamp was identical to the one on her side of the bed, but Beverly hadn't paid much attention to either. She saw now that each had a white shade and a tall body of clear glass in the form of a stretched jar with a slightly protruding base. On the base of Philip's lamp were set two tiny orange objects: his trusty earplugs. The bell-shaped plugs were resting side by side on the wider of their two ends, which resembled suction cups. Their rounder ends were thrust upward like fantasy breasts.

"Did you put my earplugs there?"

"No," Beverly said. "I didn't see them after I went to bed. You must have done it."

Her answer pleased him, she saw, but not enough to dampen a naturally contrary nature.

"Have you ever known me to take them out during the night? Or to put them someplace neatly if I did? They usually fall out. If I notice one gone, I might pull the other one out, but then I just

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toss it at the nightstand. It's a miracle if it ends up there."

Beverly was well acquainted with a similar miracle: his spent tissues landing in the wastepaper basket.

"And look where they ended up," Philip said, pointing again to the lamp. "It's the perfect spot for them. But I never even noticed that lamp last night. I was too bushed to read. Are you sure you didn't put them there?"

"I'm positive."

"So if you didn't do it and I didn't do it, who did?"

"Heather?" Beverly asked, feeling contrary by then herself.

"Close. How about Heather's ghost? I mean, the ghost Heather felt in the house."

Beverly pointed out that Heather had only said the house would be a good place for a ghost story. Philip missed the distinction.

"She was right. Look at the way those earplugs were stuck on that glass. I mean, it's the perfect place to put them, but it's unnatural too."

Beverly was moved to quote Bill Murray. "You're right. No human being would stack books like that."

Her husband encountered the same skepticism from the others. The exception was Heather, who had passed an uneasy night and blamed psychic vibrations.

"She was hungry, probably," Dial said to Beverly as they sat in a golf cart on the sixth hole of the Strachan Palms Golf Club, watching Heather waggle interminably. "What do you think of Philip's ghost?"

Beverly said, "If it picks up his underwear tonight, I'm taking it home in a bottle."

"The neat ghost of Strachan Island," Dial said with a laugh. "Maybe it's a dead chambermaid."

Mentioning home had reminded Beverly of another issue. She explored it tangentially. "The real ghost of this trip is Molly. I miss her."

Dial immediately changed the topic to the seven wood she'd hit into a pond on the previous hole.

"She knows something," Beverly thought, while pretending to listen. "She knows Philip is seeing someone, but she won't say it. And we've known each other forever."

Then she remembered how Philip had let slip Nelson Pierce's secret plans for Molly. Beverly hadn't called to warn her, a woman she'd known forever. She hadn't wanted to get involved. Next year Dial and Heather would be waiting for a stranger to finish waggling. A Tiffany, probably. Or a Stephanie.

The husbands' threesome always teed off first, so they would

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have time for a drink before the women finished. As she entered the clubhouse bar after turning in her cart, Beverly decided that the men had had time for two drinks or maybe three. Nelson was laughing himself purple, and Dial's normally staid husband Willard was pointing to his elongated head while twirling his finger, the universal dumb show for insanity.

"We're having a séance tonight, ladies," he said. "We're going to lay Phil's ghost."

"Watch your language," Heather said.

Learn your language, Beverly thought.

Philip, whose laughter was obviously forced, said, "I never mentioned a séance. I said we should all take the ghost walk. Our house is bound to be on it."

"They might be afraid to include us," Nelson said. "A ghost who collects earplugs might be too gruesome for the tourist trade."

"It had to take his earplugs," Dial said. "Phil couldn't hear it rattling its chains."

"Did you hear any chains, Bev?" Heather asked.

"It was more like bedsprings," Beverly said, effectively diverting the conversation.

But not diverting her husband. On the drive back to the house, as they crept through the island's two-block business district, Philip spotted the ghost walk's distinctive green and black sign hanging from the porch roof of a used-book store. This time the sign's message was "tickets sold here." Beverly, who had been wanting to visit the store anyway, volunteered to jump out and walk the rest of the way back.

The shop's familiar mustiness instantly transported her to the basement stacks of the library where she worked. The entire staff was a lone woman behind a cluttered desk, who was speaking on the phone and didn't acknowledge Beverly's arrival. Beverly walked to the shelves opposite the woman's desk and began to work her way to the back of the shop. In the meantime, the shopkeeper continued to discuss her business at a volume audible to passersby on the sidewalk. She was proposing the sale of the shop, Beverly realized, to either a real estate agent or a lawyer. Of the entire shop, the woman insisted more than once, building, books, fixtures, and "goodwill." Beverly wondered how much goodwill a store owner who ignored her customers could have built up. She was more impressed with the stock, though she was professionally offended by the haphazard arrangement of the books and by the unshelved stacks in every corner.

She fell into thinking about her husband, but not for once about his possible adultery. She wondered instead at the always literal

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lawyer suddenly obsessing about ghosts on the slenderest of evidence. The woman finally finished her call, and Beverly bought four tickets for the tour. Nelson and Willard were staying home to watch the first game of the NBA finals, though they'd volunteered to photograph "any and all ectoplasm."

At nine that night, Philip and the three women reported to the foot of the fishing pier. A few minutes later, they were joined by a bearded man in shorts and a T-shirt. His dark hair protruded from a faded ball cap that bore an even more faded bulldog logo. His T-shirt read: "The truth is in there."

"Hi," he said. "I collect the tickets for the ghost tour."

"Who conducts it?" Philip asked as he passed them over.

"I do. But I like to have the tickets in hand before I admit it. My name's Hodge Parish."

"Don't tell me people are disappointed with you, Mr. Parish," Heather said, and Beverly wondered if there was such a thing as a flirting gene. Not that the guide was bad material for flirting. Though not tall, he was broad shouldered and without a hint of the belly that Philip currently hid beneath a flowered shirt. His slightly knobbed nose and small, merry eyes reminded Beverly of the actor Tom Hanks.

"Call me Hodge," he said. "Some people expect someone older. And maybe spookier."

"A Southern accent would help too," Beverly thought. The guide's name had the right ring, but not his voice. It reminded Beverly of a coworker who'd been born in Boston.

Hodge led them toward the lighthouse, stopping opposite a playground full of night-owl children so he could describe the grounding of the steamer *Savannah* during the Christmas Eve storm of 1881. The on-again, off-again beach was off now, and small waves splashed on the rocks of the breakwater at the tour guide's sandaled feet. Beverly pictured waves many times higher as Hodge told of the failed attempts to reach the stranded steamer. The rescuers had been encouraged by a sound carried ashore by the wind: the singing of Christmas hymns.

"There'd been a lull in the storm, but now it blew again even harder. 'Redoubled its fury,' one of the old accounts says. By then, the singing had stopped. When the next lull came at daybreak and boats finally reached the *Savannah*, there was nothing left above water but a few broken timbers. For years afterward, people would swear that, during a storm, they could hear singing carried in by the wind."

His delivery of the last line was perfect, in Beverly's opinion. Not too dramatic. Or too jaded, which one might have expected

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from a man who must have told the story scores of times.

"Have you ever heard the singing?" a wide-eyed Heather asked.

"No," Hodge said. Sadly, to Beverly's ear.

"Bodies from the *Savannah* washed up for days," the guide continued after he'd started them along the path again.

Beverly, from her customary position at the back of the pack, saw that Philip was growing restless. They were headed away from the carriage house and the only story he wanted to hear. She willed him not to take charge and redirect them, spoiling the walk, and for once he seemed receptive to suggestion, allowing Hodge to continue uninterrupted.

"The victims washed up at the doorstep of the man many people blamed for the stranding, the lighthouse keeper, Captain Mulliner. He'd been drunk on the night of the storm, according to local gossip, and allowed the light to fail."

Mulliner's old charge was operating now. From high above the canopy of palm trees, it was sending a sweeping beam of light out across the sound, where it challenged and was defeated by the reflections of a brilliant full moon multiplied by countless waves.

"The islanders petitioned Washington to replace Mulliner, but before the government could act, the lighthouse keeper was found hanging by the neck from a rope tied to the iron railing you can see up there just below the light."

"Suicide or murder?" Philip asked.

"Never determined. Of course, the death of a man like that isn't looked into too deeply."

"Did this Mulliner leave a ghost you've never seen?" Dial asked, giving Beverly an impulse to kick her.

"Yes. That is, he's occasionally seen hanging by the neck up there. Sometimes he's struggling against the noose, sometimes he's just hanging. The last report was a 911 call made by a spring-break tourist from Connecticut." As he turned the group inland, he added, "My part of the country. The locals called her 'a susceptible Yankee.' "

He stopped at an open gate in a low stone wall. The wall of a cemetery, Beverly saw when she caught up.

"This is a great place to take pictures during the daytime," the guide said. "The live oaks are huge, and the Spanish moss may be the best on the island."

It was impressive enough right then to Beverly. The moonlight was giving the long tendrils of moss a metallic sheen, making them look like tangles of Christmas tinsel.

She shook herself, thinking, "I'll be hearing 'O Come All Ye Faithful' any minute."

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The others were already inside the wall, and Hodge was lecturing again.

"This headstone is one of the oldest in the cemetery. It belongs to a young woman who died in 1834. She was only twenty-two when a fever, probably malaria, took her. In daylight, you can just make out her name on the stone. Annabelle. Annabelle happened to be afraid of the dark. After she died, her husband would come here every night and leave a lighted candle on the stone. That went on for twenty years, but even after he died, people passing this place at night would sometimes see a little tongue of flame above the grave."

Dial reached out to touch the stone and drew her hand back quickly. "I felt wax."

Hodge said, "But not ghostly wax. In the last few years, it's become a local tradition to leave a candle for Annabelle. I've done it myself."

The next scheduled stop was the former site of an old slave cabin and a multiple homicide, but Philip's patience finally gave out.

"Look," he said, "the mosquitoes are eating me alive. Could we just cut to the McPherson carriage house?"

"Excuse me?" Hodge said.

"We're interested in any ghost connected with the McPherson property."

"Especially any with excessive compulsive disorder," Dial said.

Beverly explained. "That's where we're staying this week."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know of any hauntings there. That's the old place on Rhett Street, right?"

"Nothing at all?" Philip demanded, as though he'd been told that every tee time at his club had been taken. "The woman who sold us the tickets assured us that the house was on the tour."

He looked for confirmation to Beverly, who said, "Actually, I forgot to ask."

"Have you folks seen something there?"

"No," Philip said quickly. "We're just curious."

"I could make some inquiries."

"Of whom?" the lawyer asked.

"Mama Beacon. She lives over in Harmony. That's the district the freed slaves settled. Mama Beacon's the best source for island history. Especially the kind of history that people are afraid to write down."

"Could you take me to see her?" Philip asked.

"Sure, I guess. Just you?"

"I'll go too," Beverly said.

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She was still wondering why she'd volunteered the next day as she crouched on the backseat of the tour guide's small Ford. Hodge was filling the short drive with personal history, and Beverly was leaning forward to counterbalance Philip's obvious indifference. So far, she'd learned that Hodge was related through his mother to some of the original settlers of Strachan, the Hodges, that he'd vacationed on the island with his family as a boy, that he taught history at Georgia Tech, and that he spent his summers leading tours, kayak tours during the day and ghost walks at night.

The final approach to Harmony took them past the golf course, where the others now played without them, and several neighborhoods with gated entrances, some of which advertised available lots.

Hodge said, "The development's finally gotten this far north. Harmony itself is being cut up. Some of the locals wanted the whole district put on the historic register, but too many of the others wanted to sell out. It may be better this way. If you preserve the district and change everything around it, Harmony becomes a museum with living exhibits, a place yuppies from the Midwest ride through on their rented bicycles."

"No offense taken," Philip said.

They turned onto a street that lacked a gate or a stone sign or expensive landscaping. Beverly craned her neck to gaze up at the live oaks, bigger even than the specimens in the cemetery. Some graced the lawns of new homes and others sheltered little frame houses built on pilings of brick. Hodge pulled up in front of one of these. It had a hand-lettered sign in the yard that read, "Don't ask, won't sell."

They climbed out, Hodge clutching a small object whose bottle shape wasn't disguised by the brown paper sack wrapped tightly around it. "A little present," he said.

"Bourbon?" Philip asked.

"Catalina dressing. Mama B puts it on everything, even corn on the cob."

That odd habit hadn't made Mama Beacon overweight, Beverly saw a moment later when a small, spare woman emerged from the house. The three visitors were waiting near a concrete picnic table that stood half sunken in the mossy front yard, Hodge having explained that the historian seldom permitted strangers inside her house.

Their hostess greeted them with a bow of her grizzled head and then smiled broadly when handed the salad dressing. "You're a good boy, Hodge," she said. "You always remember."

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The guide introduced the Sibleys, and Mama Beacon frowned and shook her head. "Husband and wife?" she asked doubtfully.

For the time being, Beverly thought.

Hodge, who seemed to Beverly more taken aback by the question than Philip, hurriedly explained their errand.

"Sit down, young people, sit down," the old woman said. "You here by me," she added to Philip. "You're the one with the questions."

That left Beverly and Hodge together on the opposite side of the table, the arrangement made intimate by the small size of the fixed bench.

"Spirits at the McPherson place? That's very likely. It was the old Medley plantation once, of course."

"Medley's Hundred," said Beverly, who'd encountered the name in the old typescript she'd found.

"That's right. Many cruel and horrible things happened there."

"Anything later than that?" Philip asked. "Something to do with the carriage house?"

"One thing. A murder, though the law didn't call it that. It happened before I was born, but I remember hearing whispers of it when I was a little girl. A woman was shot there, a rich woman from the North. She and her husband were kin of the McPhersons, down for the winter. Her husband had brought his mistress with him, too, had put her up at the old Medley House Hotel that used to stand where the playground is now. You know the spot, Hodge."

"Yes," he said.

"To get her own back, the wife took up with one of the McPherson grooms. The head groom, I think. Her husband found her in the groom's bed and killed her. Shot her dead."

"But not the groom?" Beverly asked.

"Only wounded him. He didn't testify at the inquest, though. Old man McPherson had him shipped north. The husband was never brought to trial, never made to pay for his crimes, the betrayal or the murder."

Beverly thought that Philip had looked uncomfortable during the discussion of mistresses, but the ending of the story brought back his smile.

"The husband was never punished," he said, "and the wife never found peace. Her spirit's still there." He reached for his wallet. "I'd like to give you something."

"Good of you," Mama Beacon said, rising. "I'll take a minute alone with your pretty wife."

Taking Beverly by the hand, she led her inside the house. The front room was very clean and very spare, with nothing occult, no

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crystal balls or skulls or even cats. The place reminded Beverly of the Indiana farmhouse where her great grandmother had cooked wonderful things on a wood-burning stove.

"Is everything right with you, child?" Mama Beacon asked.

"Yes," Beverly said. And then, "No. I'm not sure."

"It's hard to be sure sometimes. And sometimes, hard when you are sure. I want to give you something. Don't think it foolish."

She opened a cupboard and took out a tiny calico sack tied tightly with twine.

"What is it?" Beverly asked.

"A love potion, you might say. Dissolves in water. Has no taste. For you to use when you're sure. Very sure."

At the front door, the old woman called out her good-byes to Hodge and Philip. To Beverly, she whispered, "Choose well."

Beverly thought of those parting words on the drive back to Rhett Street, during an awkward but prolonged handshake with Hodge, and while sitting poolside listening to Heather and Dial recount their golf round shot by shot. What had Mama Beacon meant by "choose well?" What was she to choose between? Winning her husband back or not? Or using the potion on Philip or on someone else?

She had absolutely no expectations regarding the powder, tasteless in more ways than one to her mind. She might have been suggestible in moonlit cemeteries, but not in broad daylight, feet from a glittering pool. But she was sure that the potion had symbolic power, that using it or not using it would constitute a decision on her part, the crossing of a line that couldn't be uncrossed. That was all Mama Beacon had hoped to accomplish by giving her the potion, Beverly told herself. The old woman wanted her to make a decision. Act to save her marriage or give it up and move on.

That structure of rational thought collapsed when Hodge Parish interrupted the group's after-dinner drinking. He was without his ball cap for once, and his silk shirt and dark shorts were carefully pressed. Philip greeted him like an old friend and offered to show him the haunted bedroom, taking him up there before Beverly had a chance to remove her bathing suit from its hook by the bathroom door. After the tour, Philip offered Hodge a beer. The guide asked instead for a glass of water.

As Beverly hurried to get it, she reached into the pocket of her shorts and fingered the calico pouch. Then she withdrew her hand as though something had bitten it. She filled a glass with plain tap water and hurried it back to their guest.

Later, she decided that her failure to act constituted the secret judgment of her heart, and later still, when she went up to bed

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and saw her husband's glass of water on the nightstand, she felt she should make the thing official. She first checked the bathroom door and heard Philip splashing in the sink. Then she poured the magic powder into his glass. There was only a pinch of it, and it disappeared immediately.

Beverly disappeared next, shutting herself in the sitting room and searching the history of the property for a mention of a murder in the carriage house. There wasn't one, of course. It wasn't the sort of thing one would include in bedtime reading for tourists. But Beverly considered another possibility. The murder story might have been the invention of the very intuitive Mama Beacon, a cautionary tale on the dangers of paying back an unsatisfactory husband. Beverly thought of Hodge Parish again, thought of the plain water she'd served him, sighed, and went to bed.

Early the next morning, she got out of bed without disturbing Philip and went for a walk on the beach. She went though she knew that, according to the lore of love potions, Philip would fall madly in love with the first person he saw. It was daylight again, and she was again less indulgent with herself and with fantastic ideas. And she was sad. Her heart had reached a final judgment during the long night, and it wasn't the secret one she'd earlier suspected. She had decided not to save her marriage. Let Philip fall in love with someone, anyone, else. Heather, perhaps. That would serve Nelson Pierce right. Or let him leave her for the unknown woman in Indiana. And good luck to them.

Though she stretched her walk as long as the disappearing beach would permit, the house was still quiet when she returned. She slowly climbed the stairs to the master suite, intending to tell Philip of her decision.

He was still in bed. When she saw the empty glass on the nightstand, she felt a moment's impulse to let him sleep. Instead, she called his name and touched his arm. Its skin was very cold. She shook him, felt for a pulse, and screamed for help.

Beverly returned twice to Strachan Island. The first time was for her husband's cursory inquest, so cursory that it reminded her of Hodge's remark about a long-dead lighthouse keeper: "The death of a man like that isn't looked into too deeply." The coroner, whose last name happened to be Hodge, ruled Philip Sibley's death a natural one, from heart failure. He consoled the widow afterward.

"The arteries of his heart were pretty well fatted up," said Dr. Hodge, who fit that description himself. "Like the arteries of a lot

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of men his age, I'm afraid. He'd never had any problems before?"

"None," Beverly said. It was obvious to her that the doctor wanted to ask her something else. She decided to take the same line with him that she'd earlier taken with the police: volunteer nothing, lie about nothing. In the first category she'd filed Mama Beacon's love potion.

"About this ghost," Dr. Hodge said.

Ghosts again, Beverly thought. Philip's last obsession was common knowledge, having been mentioned to the police by a nearly hysterical Heather.

"It's awfully intriguing. That story Mama Beacon told you about a murder in the old days, as far as I can learn, was pure moonshine. But your late husband may have believed it, did believe it, from what you and the others said. So he thought he was sleeping in a room haunted by a woman who'd have good reason to hate any man, especially a married man. Then if a board creaked that last night or the wind moaned, who knows what his heart would have done? Tried to claw its way out of his rib cage, maybe, if you'll pardon the image."

Despite her earlier resolve, Beverly couldn't keep herself from asking a question. "Couldn't it just have been something he ate?"

"It was everything he ate for the last ten years," the doctor replied. "But you're asking if it was something he had that last night. We did a standard screening for toxins. 'Course, that wouldn't have caught anything too exotic. Did he have any roots or herbs unknown to science that night?"

"I don't know," Beverly said.

" 'Course not," said the doctor as he patted her arm. "We'll never know. There's always more questions than answers in this life. It's probably better that way. Better for the spirit."

One answer did come to Beverly, a solution to the mystery of her husband's sudden fascination with ghosts. It came in the form of a young woman in a too bright sundress and too much eye makeup who broke down at Philip's viewing. She was the other woman, Beverly realized while consoling her in the family lounge. The girl's earrings were silver pentagrams, and from her necklace hung an Egyptian cat with glittering green eyes. Gently, Beverly asked her if she was interested in the supernatural.

The girl got herself in hand immediately and asked a question of her own. "Do you think the carriage house ghost killed Philip?"

Beverly thought of all the odd twists the week had taken, all the unlikely connections that could be traced back to a pair of earplugs, and answered, "I do."

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The second time Beverly returned to the island, it was to buy the used-book store in the village. Under her management, the store continued to sell tickets for the ghost walk, though Beverly herself would never agree to take part. But she often went on early morning kayak tours, eventually rising to Hodge Parish's second in command.

Some months later, after she'd been forced to give up kayaking by her advanced pregnancy, she was standing in the open doorway of the store, watching the foot traffic and enjoying a cool breeze. She noticed a small figure with a shopping bag standing on the opposite side of the street. Mama Beacon. The old woman smiled and nodded to her.

Beverly had avoided Mama Beacon's house in Harmony like a guilty co-conspirator. Now she felt an urge to rush across the street and demand an explanation for everything that had happened. She was stopped by the memory of something she'd been told by a kindly doctor. It was better to have more questions than answers in this life. Better for the spirit. She settled for simply nodding back.



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OF WAX AND WATERMARKS

R. T. LAWTON

I say it all began when Jules, our self-proclaimed king of the Parisian underworld, woke up late one morning with a bad disposition from too many wine cups and decided he should have a crown made out of pure gold to put upon his scheming head. For being such a baseborn criminal, Jules thought of himself as our royalty, and considered himself to be much the same as Louis XIV, our Sun King, who currently sat upon the throne of France.

But of course, the Chevalier, Remy, tells this same story differently, as if he knew what really happened. Seems he takes great pleasure in pointing his right index finger directly at my young Norman nose and claiming the entire situation is my fault.

I can only shrug my shoulders.

"Your fingers are too clumsy," he growls. "Too bad you learned nothing in Mother Margaux's school for orphans. Keep this up and you won't survive into manhood."

And in the end, yes, for my part, I have to admit that Lemat, one of King Jules's hard-faced enforcers, had caught me with my hand in the side pocket of his ragged woolen coat. If only Lemat hadn't turned suddenly to eye a passing trollop, I'd have had his coin purse and he none the wiser. As it was, Lemat quickly realized what was going on and clamped his iron fist around my wrist. When he yanked my hand out of his pocket, wonder of wonders, his coin purse was clutched in my fingers. And yes, I do agree, it didn't look good on my part.

"Thief," cried Lemat in a booming voice. "Pickpocket," he shouted in an even louder tone. And the crowd came running.

Of course, our people residing here in these old Roman ruins on the Buttes-Chaumont overlooking the ancient refuse dump on the outskirts of Paris had nothing better to do that day than to come watch my humiliation. Beggars, trollops, thieves, and escaped prisoners—all my so-called friends—dropped whatever they were doing and hurried toward Lemat. They came in droves

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to see what entertainment was to be offered, especially since one of their own had been caught stealing from a fellow criminal. Although, considering the high taxes King Jules levies on our light-fingered trade, and with the heavy hands his enforcers lay upon us when we are reluctant to pay, I don't really consider him or any of his cutthroats to be one of us.

Naturally, the cries of excitement from such a melee soon reached the ears of King Jules. He must have been lying abed someplace close to have pushed his way through the gathering so quickly.

"Silence," he screamed.

It was as if a knife had suddenly slashed everyone's vocal cords. No one spoke, not even in whispers. A few gawkers standing nearest to the center of the commotion stepped back and made room for our tyrant king.

From where I dangled in Lemat's grip, my toes barely touching the ground, I myself hesitated to even breathe.

King Jules closed his eyes and rubbed both temples with his greasy fingertips.

"My head pounds like an ironmonger's hammer." He spoke in a low voice, and I'm sure even those at the rear of the crowd strained forward to hear every word, lest it somehow affect them personally. Then he glared at Lemat. "What have you here?"

Lemat lowered me to the ground and twisted my hand around to show Jules the stolen coin purse.

"This little wretch tried to pick my pocket."

"Ah," replied Jules, "then we must enforce the rules." He raised his voice to the crowd. "Stealing from one of my men is the same as stealing from me, and no one steals from me. Kill him."

Fresh air flooded my lungs as my breath came in short gasps, each one of which might be my last. I had never realized before how precious the simple act of breathing could be.

Lemat drew a dagger from the sheath at his waist.

I caught a dull flash of sunlight reflected from the gray, pitted finish along the blade's length.

King Jules took two steps away from us, paused in mid step, then whirled around.

"Wait," he commanded.

Lemat kept one sharp edge of the dagger against my throat.

Jules stepped closer and peered into my face. "You're the young pickpocket that lives with Josette and the Chevalier, Remy, aren't you?"

It wasn't easy for me to speak with that razor's edge held against my tender skin, but I managed a meek, "Yes, sire."

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"Of course," said Jules. Then he strode back and forth in front of us for several minutes with his hands clasped behind his back. I wondered what schemes were running through his wine-fogged brain.

The sharpness of a thin slicing near my Adam's apple soon distracted me. A wetness seemed to be trickling down beneath the front of my collar. If only my blood vessels weren't so enlarged by the pounding of my heart, I might yet hope to survive the blade. Surely that dribble of moisture was merely sweat.

Jules stopped his pacing and massaged his forehead.

"Give me the boy," he said to Lemat, "and summon the Chevalier to my court immediately."

Lemat removed the sharp edge from my neck, then slowly turned my head so I could watch him lick the pink-stained blade. I wanted to faint, but his iron grip on my wrist kept me standing. He sheathed the dagger, then wrenching his coin purse from my hand he stomped off as if having been deprived of his one great pleasure in life.

I collapsed to the ground and gingerly touched my throat with two fingertips. In wonderment, I held these same two fingers in front of my face to see a light redness thinly smeared across the tips. The fiend had actually cut me.

My mind quickly turned to the question of where I could find some brass to press against my wound before it was too late. For months, all of Paris had been abuzz about the curing powers of brass. Even old Mother Margaux claimed that a piece of the metal around her neck helped ease her chilblains. And Cesar Herbaux, the alchemist at the university, declared rubbing brass on his sore shoulder took the pain away. He also claimed the metal had other powers, which he would only discuss in private consultation for a few coins. I had to get a piece of this curing metal before my wound was the death of me.

"Get up, boy. It's only a scratch."

Jules yanked me to my feet and dragged me off to his end of the ruined villa. Here, he kept his court and ruled most of the thieves of Paris. His throne, nothing more than a high-backed, old-fashioned chair with torn brocade cushions, had stuffing leaking out of rents in the upholstery. No doubt it too had once been stolen from some rich merchant's house and later rendered up as tribute to King Jules.

He thrust me to the ground at his feet, then assumed a regal bearing on his throne. I couldn't help but feel the vise of his left hand curled around the back of my neck as we waited for the Chevalier.

Twice I tried to speak, explain how it was naught but a misun-

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derstanding between Lemat and me, a mere joke on my part, but each time the pressure increased on the back of my neck and I knew to be silent. The sun had moved two hands' breadth higher in the sky and Jules's posture had begun to slump on his throne before the Chevalier made his appearance. My first emotion on seeing him stride across the courtyard was one of joy and relief. He would get me out of this. Then, a second feeling, one of outrage, quickly followed. Why had Remy taken so long in coming? Did I mean so little to him and Josette? Sure, he and I were rivals for Josette's favors, but that was no reason to leave *me* swinging in the wind.

Remy doffed his hat and made an exaggerated bow.

"Your majesty desires my presence?"

Jules sat up straighter on his throne.

"Your young friend here was caught picking the pocket of one of my lieutenants. Under such conditions, stealing from me and mine is punishable by death, *un roi, une loi*—one king, one law—but I thought that maybe you, with your considerable talents, might have some other possibilities we could discuss. Perhaps some small act or token of faith to change my mind and which could help me demonstrate the mercy of my law."

"What do you want?"

"Ah, and here I had always believed you nobility to be more subtle in your speech. Perhaps your recent fall from grace and resulting loss of lands has made you more blunt these days. But then of course you live like one of us now, rather than in that fine house which was once your father's."

Remy tried to control his emotions, but I noticed a slight hardening to his face.

"And?"

Jules's voice softened.

"And I had a dream last night in which I wore a golden crown with many sparkling jewels."

"You have the gold to make such a crown?"

Jules grinned like a lean and hungry predator.

"That I do. Tithes from my many subjects over the years have provided me with enough rings and bracelets to be melted down into two equal bars of gold. Just one of these bars will be sufficient to make my crown."

"I know nothing about fashioning precious metals into objects."

Jules waved the back of his free hand.

"I have a Bohemian, a man much experienced in the working of gold. He claims the knowledge that is needed."

Ah, I thought I saw where this was heading, even if Remy didn't.

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The Chevalier kept his face impassive. "In which case you need . . ."

"Several large jewels to choose from," finished the king, "red rubies, green emeralds, and sparkling diamonds to set in the crown."

"And you want me to steal them."

"I do."

"In return for?"

"The life of your young friend here."

The Chevalier rubbed his chin as if in deep thought.

I couldn't believe it; my friend was actually debating whether or not to save my life. I silently vowed that if Remy left me with this maniac, I would never speak to him again. Not one word.

The Chevalier dropped his hand to his side, stared at the king for a moment, then turned on his heel.

"Remy!" I started to blurt out, but the "R" had scarce passed my lips before Jules's hard grasp choked off my ability to speak.

"You leave the boy to his death?" inquired the king.

Remy turned back to face us and glanced in my direction as if just now seeing me for the first time.

"Oh, the orphan," he replied. "That's a small matter between us. However, I do have at least two problems with your request."

Jules relaxed his grip slightly on my neck.

"What is life without problems? Speak your mind."

The Chevalier held up his left index finger.

"First of all, I know of no one person who has as many jewels as what you are obviously considering for your crown."

The king laughed. "I am acquainted with a particular gentleman, a very well-fed man, who has a nice collection of fair-sized gems down there in the city. By keeping one foot in both worlds, this Monsieur Rousseau is one of those men who occasionally purchases some of our better goods and grows fat on the profits from his sales."

"You mean stolen jewelry, silver platters, smuggled cargoes, those sorts of goods."

"Exactly. And I know for a fact he has what I desire right there on his premises. All you need do is fashion one of your false keys, enter his house on some dark night, and relieve him of the burden of his wealth."

Remy raised a second finger.

"Now we come to the second problem, the sharing of this sudden wealth. Since I take all the risk, I'll also take the lion's share."

Jules relaxed his grip even further. I could tell he felt in his element now. The two of them began to haggle like old fishwives

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over the last loaf of bread. The king insisting that I be part of the share going to the Chevalier, while Remy countered that I had little worth to him. Except that my life hung in the balance, they talked about me as if I wasn't even there, sitting in the dirt at Jules's feet.

At last they made their deal.

Then Remy held up another finger.

"Third, I need the boy for this work."

Jules hesitated, then flung me forward.

"Take him for now. I can always find him later if necessary."

We had but gone three steps when the king's voice floated over our shoulders.

"You have five days, Chevalier. My Bohemian tinker will have the crown fashioned by then and will be ready for the jewels."

"Done," said Remy without turning his head. Then he dragged me off to that portion of the ruined Roman villa that he, Josette, and I shared as shelter.

Our domicile was nothing more than three stone walls and a crumbling doorway without a door. Long poles covered with thatch made for a roof over our heads to keep out most of the snow and spring rains. A fire pit dug in the center provided heat for cooking and warmth on cold nights. Remy and Josette slept on one side of the fire; I on the other side. We were a family of sorts, though if I had the choice, I would have shuffled the arrangements.

A few years back, Josette had brought me in from the dirty cobblestones of a back alley along the Seine where she'd found me sleeping in a pile of trash. She fed me, gave me warmer clothing, and finally enlisted me in Mother Margaux's school for young pickpockets. At least now I had a trade to bring food to the table we shared. And even though she was a few years older than me, I followed her around like a young pup getting his ears scratched. She was mine. And then Remy, the Chevalier, came and everything changed. Not overnight, mind you, but enough for me to see that her attentions were gradually being directed elsewhere.

And now, as if the humiliation I'd just suffered at the hands of the king wasn't demeaning enough, Remy found great satisfaction in telling Josette about my latest escapade and the deal he'd had to strike with Jules to get me off the hook. The reproach in Josette's eyes became more than I could bear. If that was the way they wanted to be, then I wouldn't even ask for one small piece of brass to cure my neck wound. I would just die, and perhaps they would speak well of me afterward. While they discussed the best way to go about this new thieving business, I stared at the floor until Remy clutched my shoulder.

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"Do you know where Paquay, the old lockpick, lives?"

I nodded. I knew of him and had a fair idea where to look.

"Take me to him."

We immediately left the buttes, descended along the trail, and skirted the garbage dump in the ancient stone quarries. I was too despondent to hold my nose against the foul odors as I usually did whenever passing this way. But by the time we got to the meadow, the air had grown sweeter, the day warmer. My spirits began to lift of their own accord: Colorful birds took flight, while others sang happily in the trees. I couldn't help myself and soon whistled back at them.

After a couple hours of walking, we entered the gates of Paris where the watch put heavy chains across the street at night for curfew. We needed to conduct our business and be gone by nightfall, else risk being set upon by the bailiffs of the law.

I soon located the ironmonger's shop. Here, in a back corner, Paquay was known to keep a sturdy workbench where he often fashioned the tools of his lockpick trade from discarded scraps of metal. With luck, he'd be there today. I peered through the white smoke drifting from the ironmonger's forge. A diminutive old man sat hunched over a table in the far corner. With a small hammer in hand, he seemed to be bending metal slivers of various sizes into twisting shapes. He'd hold the twisted slivers up in the light for a better view, grunt, place them back on his miniature anvil, and then bang on them with the hammer again. Without ever once looking away from his work, he somehow must've noticed my presence.

"Why do you watch me, boy?"

I didn't know what to say.

Remy prodded me forward with a none too gentle push.

"I . . . I have a friend who wishes to speak with you," were the words that finally left my mouth.

Paquay continued with his hammering and bending.

"Could be I have no wish to speak with him."

Remy stepped up beside me.

"And if this friend can make the words worth their value?"

The hammering ceased. The old man turned to face us.

"Go on."

"I have need to enter a house and not much time in which to do it."

"Then knock on the door. Perhaps the owner will grant you admittance."

"It would be best if the owner did not see me inside his residence." Remy extracted two silver coins from his sleeve and

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placed them on the table. "I have heard that you are an expert in such matters."

Paquay studied Remy's face for some moments and glanced only briefly at my own before his gaze finally settled down onto the round pieces of silver. Laying aside his small hammer, he reached across for the coins and swept them into his other palm.

It was then that I noticed Paquay was minus the first two joints of both index fingers. I opened my mouth to inquire, but Remy dug his thumb into my shoulder muscle.

"Whose house is it that you don't wish to be seen in?" asked the old man after the coins had been secured on his person.

"A Monsieur Rousseau has residence in the city. I believe you have already made his acquaintance."

A look of red anger passed over Paquay's face. He held up both hands with the back of each toward us.

"Don't jest with me."

"I assure you, this is no jest. His is the house, and I am told you are familiar with the lock in his door."

"I'll gladly sell you some iron rings to place on the tip of *your* index fingers," he wriggled his two mangled stumps, "if you wish to have amputated fingers like mine."

The old man dropped his hands into his lap and struggled to contain himself. "Each of my special rings has a slender pick fastened to it so that a skilled man can place his fingertip with the lockpick on it into the opening of a ward lock. With one of these rings you may try your own skill at rotating the levers inside the lock on Rousseau's front door."

"Why can't the merchant's lock be picked in the same way as any other ward lock?"

"Rousseau is not the smartest man in the land, but he is clever enough to protect the wealth he stores in his house."

"The lock, Paquay, tell me about the lock."

The flush of redness left Paquay's cheeks, but a tinge of the anger remained in his voice.

"Our clever merchant hired an inventor from Florence to rework the door. Now, whenever the levers don't get moved in the proper manner by his large brass key, a hidden blade comes out to slice across the inside of the keyhole."

"You must have tried it twice," I exclaimed.

Paquay turned back to his table and picked up his hammer again.

"As the boy said, I tried to pick the lock. Two different nights. I'll risk no more of my fingers on Monsieur Rousseau's wealth."

"How else can one enter the house?"

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Paquay selected one of his bent metal slivers from the tabletop.

"I've pondered that myself."

"And?"

"A ladder propped against one of the upper windows won't do. In that part of the city, the watch would soon spy the ladder and raise the alarm. As for the windows on the main level, they're all covered by iron grillwork, plus Rousseau employs a night watchman to prowl the main floor against intruders. Make one noise and it attracts the attention of the watchman."

Remy rubbed his chin.

"You're saying there is no way in?"

Paquay laid his selected sliver of metal onto the miniature anvil and carefully positioned it to his liking.

"I'm saying the only way in that I see is with Monsieur Rousseau's large brass key."

"Where does he keep this key?"

"On a long chain around his neck and stowed safely inside his shirt. He never lets the key out of his sight."

Paquay began to hammer on his sliver of twisted iron.

Remy waited until the old man paused long enough in his hammering to turn the metal sliver into a new position on the anvil. Then Remy spoke. "Not much information for my two pieces of silver."

The hammer stopped for a moment.

"After I lost the fingers, I followed Rousseau for several days. He likes to look at beautiful women, but he never seems to have the courage to take one back to his house. And he walks in the parks along the Seine every afternoon, but I don't know what you can do with such gossip as this."

"Nor I," replied the Chevalier.

"Well, that's all I have."

Remy grabbed my shirt collar and pulled me away from the ironmonger's shop, but instead of returning back the way we came, he led me along the winding cobblestone streets until we arrived at a better neighborhood in the city. Here, the houses were richer and more ornate, not the shabby, ill-kept buildings I was used to. After wandering back and forth on a street whose name I did not know, Remy stopped in the doorway of one of the houses and positioned me against one wall. Then he engaged me in conversation about nothing. I tried to answer his questions and keep up with what he was saying, but every time I looked at his face, his eyes were focused somewhere over my shoulder and across the street.

After a half hour of this nonsense, my stomach started to growl. I needed to eat. Somewhere nearby, there had to be a market

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where I could liberate a loaf of bread or a slab of good cheese. I started off.

The Chevalier quickly extended his arm across my chest.

"Not yet," he whispered, but I could tell by the movement of his eyes that something was happening on the other side of the street. I wanted to look back over my shoulder, only his arm kept me pressed against the wall. Then he spun me around and out into the street, placed his hand on the back of my neck, and we began to walk at a leisurely pace toward the river.

If I hurried forward, he pulled me back, and if I lagged behind, he soon dragged me up beside him. In time, I realized the same frock coat moving before us in the street was always kept a certain distance in front of our walk. From the girth of the man inside the coat, this had to be the well-fed Rousseau whom King Jules had described earlier this morning.

At the street running along the right bank of the Seine, Rousseau in his frock coat entered one of the parks. Remy and I stopped at the entrance and watched him stroll through the manicured gardens. After several moments of standing in silence, we headed back to the Buttes-Chaumont. As we walked, it was only by providence and my skilled fingers that I was able to purloin one withered turnip and some onions, left over from last year's crop, for our next meal. A housewife had turned away for a few seconds in order to settle a dispute between two of her brood, but it was all the time I needed to reach inside the open doorway.

For the rest of the afternoon and most of that evening, Josette and Remy put their heads together and conversed in whispers. Sometimes one would leave for a while and come back with a rolled up bundle under one arm, then later the other would do the same. Mostly they ignored me as I chopped up the turnip and onions into the small kettle heating over the fire pit in our living quarters. I stirred the pot and listened closely to their voices but could catch only a few words and phrases of their plans. This much was for sure, it involved Monsieur Rousseau and his brass key, but those two friends of mine would tell me nothing.

After supper, I yawned, went to my side of the fire, and pretended to fall asleep. When they assumed I truly slumbered, their actions became more unguarded, and thus through the slit of one barely opened eyelid, I could observe some of their preparations.

The Chevalier quietly melted a perfectly good candle, letting the soft wax drip onto the flatness of a pewter plate. Finished, he set the plate aside to cool. Only a nub was left of the candle. In the meanwhile, Josette had unrolled her assortment of bundles to display a fine dress of the upper classes, plus a rich shawl to wear

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around her shoulders. Remy nodded his approval.

Remy's bundles were considerably smaller. He brought out bootblack to shine his belt and boots, silver polish to brighten his scabbard, buttons and buckles, and a dazzling white handkerchief to rest inside his sleeve. I was still trying to figure out how all of this entered into their scheme when I dozed off.

Late the next morning, I awoke at the murmur of voices. Josette sounded to be in some minor discomfort, twitching her shoulders and complaining in a low voice. Remy stood to one side and patted her on the upper back as if to reassure her everything would be all right. After a final hug between them, Josette covered her shoulders with a plain wool shawl, tucked a large bundle under her arm, and left. Remy turned in my direction, but I quickly closed my eyes and lay still.

When I heard Remy go out, I rose to my feet. His bundle, minus the handkerchief, was still resting on the floor. I picked up the pewter plate from last night. It was warm to the touch, but the melted candle wax was gone. Very well, they had set their plan in motion. I would just have to follow at a distance and see what was to happen.

As they crossed the meadow, I hung well back to keep from being seen, but then had to run like the devil to keep from losing sight of them when they entered the city. Here, hidden in the press of other people, I could follow closer in the streets and not worry about being discovered so easily.

In time, we came to the parks along the Seine. Remy and Josette entered one of the parks, stepped off the path, and disappeared into a grove of trees. Since I could not follow directly without fear of being caught, I made my way around to the other side of the park and approached the tree grove from the back side. By now, Josette had donned her new dress and draped the rich shawl around her shoulders. To all appearances, she looked like a lady in waiting at King Louis's court. If I hadn't already memorized every line and angle of Josette's face, I wouldn't have recognized her.

Remy had positioned himself by a tree where he had a clear view of the park's entrance. Obviously, they were waiting for Monsieur Rousseau to make his early afternoon walk.

With nothing left for me except to watch their scheme play out, I found a soft patch of grass and made myself comfortable. White clouds drifted overhead as the sun reached its zenith and started down the other side of the sky. Now my belly began to speak to me. I reached inside the cloth sack I'd brought along. A loaf of bread earlier freed from the cooling pans of an unwatchful baker would keep my stomach good company. Several bites later, I saw

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Remy motion to Josette. I glanced at the park's entrance, and there came Monsieur Rousseau on his daily afternoon stroll.

Josette stepped daintily out onto the path and advanced as if she had no notice of anyone else around her. Five paces from Rousseau, she slowly flung one arm up to her forehead and swooned to the ground. Monsieur Rousseau hurried forward, but seemed not to know what to do. I jumped to my feet and had almost run to her side, when Remy stepped onto the path. He knelt by her shoulder and lifted her head off the ground.

"Quick, monsieur, we must help this woman. She is a lady-in-waiting for the queen. Your assistance will be greatly rewarded."

"What can I do?" inquired Rousseau.

"It's a seizure," replied the Chevalier. "We need a piece of brass to cure her."

Rousseau fumbled in his pockets.

"Perhaps I have some small item made from brass."

"No, no," returned Remy. "Have you not heard of Cesar Herbaux from the university?"

"But of course," said Monsieur Rousseau, "all of Paris knows of the great alchemist and his work."

Remy kept his eyes cast down.

"The queen herself has consulted Cesar Herbaux about the seizures of her lady-in-waiting lying here before you. Cesar claims only a large piece of brass applied to the back of the lady's neck will bring her about."

Rousseau fumbled with the front of his shirt.

"I do have a large brass key on a chain, but I never let the key out of my sight."

Remy raised his hand, palm up.

"Quickly, the key, before too much damage is done to the lady."

Rousseau sank to his knees by Josette's head.

"It is *my* key," mumbled Rousseau, "perhaps I should apply the brass."

"We have no time for this," snapped the Chevalier. "I have the knowledge and experience to do this properly. Give me the key. You place your hand on her chest and check her pulse rate."

By now, I had crept closer and could see the bare top of Josette's bosom begin to rise and fall at an alarming pace. Rousseau seemed mesmerized by the sight. He quickly surrendered the key while he placed his hand in the requested position. It too rose and fell with each rapid breath that Josette took.

With one hand, Remy accepted the key on the end of the long chain and pressed the brass firmly to Josette's back just below the neck. After several muttered prayers, Remy nudged Josette with his

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knee. Her eyes fluttered open to gaze on Rousseau's perspiring face.

"Oh, monsieur," she gasped in a breathy voice, "thank you for your assistance. I feel much better now."

Rousseau's hand seemed reluctant to relinquish the task it had been given. In the end, he actually blushed.

The Chevalier helped Josette to her feet and carefully arranged her shawl around her shoulders. Then he thanked Rousseau for his help and assured him that the queen would be made known of his name. Rousseau stood there with the key now in his hand, a slight flush still on his cheeks, and a definite giddiness to his speech.

I, for one, had no idea what made Rousseau so pliable. Nor could I see what Remy had gotten out of this masquerade. The large brass key had remained on the end of the chain, so we still didn't have the key to Monsieur Rousseau's house. How were we to get in and steal the jewels? The Chevalier's scheme had turned out to be a farce. Now what was I to do? King Jules would soon give me back to Lemat. I shuddered at the thought of that assassin's dagger blade. There was no help for me.

Rousseau slowly continued on his stroll, with many a glance back over his shoulder, until he passed from sight.

Josette and Remy slowly headed for the park's entrance. As soon as they assumed no one was looking, they stepped behind a tree long enough for Remy to peel a thin slab of candle wax from Josette's upper back just below the neck. He placed the wax on a flat surface, wrapped it up, and stuck the package inside his coat. She quickly changed back into her old clothes.

Now I understood. Remy had used the concealed wax to make an impression of the large brass key. I might be saved after all.

For the next several days, Remy stayed inside our dwelling. Selecting one metal file after another, he continued to work on a key blank from the ironmonger's shop. From time to time, he'd lay the false key over the wax impression, make a mark, then file again at the metal edges. It was midday when he finally seemed satisfied with the key and began to pack a few items in a small cloth bag.

"Get your cloak, boy. You and I are spending the night in the city."

"What of the curfew? The watch?"

"Surely you know how to avoid them in the dark." Remy paused in his speech. "You must be good for something," he added.

I nodded. My years of sleeping on the back streets of Paris would stand me in good stead to keep us invisible for at least one night. Josette bid us farewell at the doorway. She kissed Remy and seemed not to want to let go of his arm. Me, I got a pat on the

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head. I grumped all the way to the gates of Paris and beyond, but that night, I sought my little revenge.

By dark, we'd made our way to a side street close to Rousseau's house. Here in the dim alley, I used my years of street experience to carefully select the trash pile that was to conceal me for the night. Then I directed Remy to a garbage pile on the other side of the alley for himself. We parted for a few hours.

At a time when all honest citizens were asleep and black clouds scudded across the face of the half moon, Remy shook off his covering of garbage and whispered for me to follow him. We paused at the mouth of the dark alley and listened. Hearing no sounds of the watch, we made our way to Rousseau's house and huddled in the shadowed doorway.

Remy produced his false key, applied a thin coating of wax to the portion he had filed, and silently inserted the key into the ward lock. The key turned a ways before stopping. Remy withdrew the key, held it out to the half-moon light, then proceeded to file where the wax had been scored. On his second try, the key turned round and the door opened.

"Stay here," he hissed, "until I call you. And be quiet."

Of course I could be quiet. Who did he think I was?

Remy eased the door open, disappeared inside, and closed the door behind him.

I waited and waited and waited. Then I heard the sound of tramping feet and muted voices. I peered around the doorway. The watch was coming. Quickly, I pushed open the door, stepped in, and shut it. A hand grabbed my shoulder. I started to cry out, but a second hand wrapped itself across my mouth.

"I told you to wait outside," whispered the Chevalier.

I shook my head. He loosened his hand on my mouth.

"The watch is coming," I mumbled between his fingers.

Remy released me, then produced the false key, locked the door from our side, and put his ear against the wood to listen.

"They've gone," he said at last. "You stay here by the door."

I turned to follow him and tripped over something lying on the floor.

Remy struck a flint and lit a candle.

Now I could see that I'd stumbled over Monsieur Rousseau's night watchman.

"Is he dead?" I whispered.

"No, merely unconscious."

Remy placed a two-foot length of hard, polished wood into my hand.

"Don't let him wake up before I come back."

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Then he was gone up the stairs in search of Rousseau slumbering in his bed.

Several times when the night watchman groaned in his unconsciousness, I raised the wooden club thinking I might have to return him to his rest. But he fortunately stayed in whatever world he had gone to visit.

After an eternity, Remy returned down the stairs with two small leather sacks in his hand.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded vigorously.

He blew out the candle, unlocked the door, listened for any untoward sounds, then locked the door again after we had passed through.

Back in the alley where we had hidden ourselves before, I found my trash pile and started to burrow in. The Chevalier made as if to join me in my hiding place, but I pushed him away.

"I didn't want to say anything before," I whispered, "but you have the aroma of spoiled apples about you. Go sleep someplace else."

By the time I had completely covered myself up, he was gone. Sleep came quickly and my dreams were pleasant until some good housewife threw slops on top of my hiding place. When her footsteps had receded out of the alley, I crawled out of the pile and into the morning sunlight. With a long stick, I prodded the garbage where Remy had hidden the night before. Empty. I left the alleyway and started for home, munching on my leftover loaf of bread. Before I'd reached the gates of Paris, Remy had fallen in step right behind me. I wrinkled my nose and knew without even turning to look because I'd recognized the faint odor of rotten apples wafting through the air. It was probably good that Remy could not see the broad grin on my face.

As we approached our Roman ruins on the Buttes-Chaumont, I found myself whistling a tune. My ordeal was over. We had the jewels and therefore I was free of Lemat's sharp blade.

Unfortunately, there at the entrance to the ruined villa, Lemat sat on a large rock, cleaning his dirty fingernails with the point of his pitted dagger. I lagged behind on Remy's off side in order to stay out of sight and had to hurry forward as we passed through the entrance. Lemat appeared not to notice us until we were slightly beyond him. Then he stood up behind us.

"It is fortunate you have returned. King Jules requires your immediate presence."

"We have the jewels now," I stammered.

"Good for you," replied Lemat. Three more of the king's

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enforcers stepped out of hiding and surrounded us. "But this concerns another matter."

In less time than it normally took me to devour a purloined slab of cheese, we were herded to the end of the ruined villa where Jules kept his throne. We found Jules pacing back and forth in front of a long table. Sitting in a chair on the other side of the table was a small swarthy man with a thick black mustache bristling below his nose and a gold hoop swinging from one earlobe. The man seemed at once both angry and frightened. His black eyes glittered.

"I've brought them," Lemat said.

Jules quit pacing and stared at us. He sniffed the air.

To forestall any questions, Remy held out his hand with one small leather bag dangling beneath.

"These are the jewels you requested."

Jules barely glanced inside the bag before stashing it in his shirt.

"I believe this concludes our bargain," said Remy.

"I've added another condition," replied King Jules.

"Need I remind you of the original agreement," retorted the Chevalier.

Jules nodded to his hard-faced assassins. They drew their swords and stood two paces back from us. Three more of the king's killers stepped up to join the circle.

And me with only a remaining crust of bread with which to defend myself. My stomach fluttered.

"We have a new problem," continued Jules, as if the Chevalier had already agreed to help. Jules held out his new crown. "My Bohemian tinker has just delivered this head ornament into my hands." He then gestured toward the short swarthy man seated on the other side of the table. "I believe it to be too light to contain all the gold I provided for its manufacture." Now Jules pointed his index finger directly at the swarthy man. "I think he stole some of my gold."

I nudged Remy to do something.

"You still have the second bar of equal weight?" inquired Remy.

"I do."

"Then use a balance scale to see if all your gold ended up in your crown."

Jules's face darkened.

"There's not a balance scale to be had in our community," he replied.

"Send one of your men down to the city."

"That would take hours," said Jules, "and I have no patience. I need to know now whether or not to cut this Bohemian's throat."

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"Do as you wish," said Remy with a flourish, "it has nothing to do with me."

Jules had his predator grin again.

"Ah, but it does. You are the one man of great learning among us," he almost purred, "so solve this problem to my satisfaction and you are finally free to go."

Remy rubbed his chin and gazed at the Bohemian tinker. The silence grew until I wanted to pull his sleeve, or scream, or something.

"I need a chair," he said at last.

Jules waved a hand at Lemat.

Lemat glanced around. Only two chairs were available nearby, the king's throne and the chair where the Bohemian sat. Lemat yanked the Bohemian upright, then carried the chair around the table.

Remy sat.

No one spoke.

After a few minutes of us staring at him, Remy requested that a small kettle just large enough to accommodate the crown be brought forward, along with a bucket of water. When the kettle appeared, the Chevalier filled it to barely overflowing with water. The surface of the water gradually settled and was still.

"Your crown," he commanded.

Jules reluctantly produced his new head ornament.

Remy tied a light cord through the crown and slowly eased it into the kettle of water. When he extracted the crown, the water level had subsided some distance. He turned to Lemat.

"I need your dagger."

Lemat looked at the king.

King Jules nodded.

Lemat handed over his gray, pitted blade.

Remy reached inside the kettle and made a long deep mark right at the upper edge of the waterline. Several in the crowd leaned over to see what he was doing. Then Remy filled the kettle up with water to the brim again.

"Now give me your second bar of gold."

Jules handed over the bar.

Remy tied the same cord around the bar and slowly lowered it into the kettle. When the water settled again, he withdrew the bar of gold with some awkwardness to the raising. The bar twisted on the cord. Quickly, Remy slipped his right hand under the gold bar to keep it from falling out of the loop.

I looked inside the kettle. Now the water had receded even more than before.

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Remy used Lemat's dagger to make a second mark at the new waterline, which was well below the first mark.

Jules shoved gawkers out of the way so he could peer into the kettle himself.

"The difference between the two watermarks," said Remy, "is how much gold has been stolen from you."

"I've been cheated," exclaimed Jules. Then he looked over at the space where the swarthy man had been standing earlier, but the Bohemian had somehow disappeared into the multitude. "Find the tinker," roared King Jules.

The crowd dissipated in several directions.

I quickly caught up with Remy, who was returning to our humble lodgings.

Unable to contain my curiosity any further, I inquired, "How did you know to do that?"

The Chevalier maintained his pace without looking back at the king's table and the gold.

"Once a man learns history, he has acquired the knowledge to solve many problems. To ensure I had this knowledge, my father engaged the services of a tutor while I was still at an early age."

For myself, the only learning I had received was at Mother Margaux's school for young pickpockets. History was a foreign subject to me, but if it increased my chances at survival, then maybe this history thing would be good to learn.

"Tell me what you learned," I implored.

Remy glanced at me, but kept up the rapid pace.

"An ancient Greek named Archimedes, when faced with a similar problem as we had today, discovered that the mass of an object displaces an equal volume of water. In other words, two equal amounts of gold, regardless of their shape, should have displaced the same amount of water."

"But the watermarks were different," I said, "and that's how you knew the tinker was a thief."

"True," replied Remy, "plus I've had other dealings with that particular Bohemian. He's cheated me on some of the merchandise I sold him in the past."

"Crooks are everywhere," I muttered. "How were we to know about the tinker?"

"In Spain, they are called *gitanos*," said Remy, "in France we call them Bohemians, yet regardless of the name, they are gypsies, silver-tongued thieves. I knew this man."

As we approached our shared dwelling, the Chevalier stopped and looked over his shoulder. I turned and glanced too. No one was paying any attention to us. Then Remy used his left hand to

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squeeze his right sleeve near the wrist. Water dropped to the ground like a small cloudburst.

At the time, I didn't think much of it, but in the weeks and months to come, my mind dwelled often on all that extra water squeezed out of the Chevalier's sleeve. Remy had ensured that the second watermark would fall well below the first and therefore the Bohemian would definitely take blame for cheating Jules on a vast amount of gold in the crown. In light of those events, I wasn't sure how much I could trust the Chevalier, especially since we both competed for the favors of only one Josette.

True, Remy had given the Bohemian tinker a standing start with which to melt into the multitude and thus make his escape, yet I retained some doubts about my own welfare under our current circumstances. This Chevalier would bear close watching in the future. I would have to be on constant guard, lest I, too, fall victim to his scheming mind.

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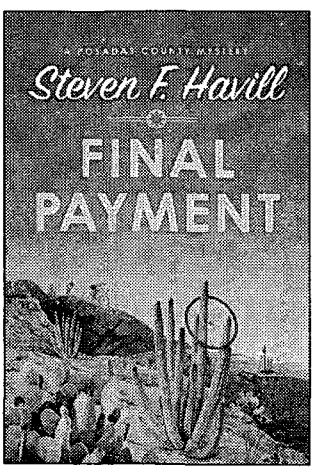
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Booked & Printed

Robert C. Hahn

Assigned to such tasks as social worker or juvenile case handler, women's roles in law enforcement were long circumscribed by their gender. But now that women are likely to fill any job in law enforcement, a new generation of procedurals has emerged that feature female protagonists who combine the day-to-day concerns of working women with the gritty details of criminal investigations. This month we consider three outstanding examples, novels in which the main character's gender is the least remarkable aspect of her performance. With these women, readers are treated to complex characters who deal competently and bravely with whatever situations they encounter.

Estelle Reyes-Guzman was first introduced to readers as a member of Undersheriff Bill Gastner's department in Steven F. Havill's excellent, if underappreciated, Posadas County series, which began with *Heartshot* in 1991. With the publication of *Scavengers* (2002), Reyes-Guzman moved from supporting player to star, replacing the retired Gastner. Through fourteen books, the series has served to illuminate the multicultural village and county of Posadas, New Mexico, which sprawls near the Mexican border.



Though Reyes-Guzman is now clearly the central character, the series is not star driven; its ensemble cast of finely drawn characters allows for more focus on the humanity of the area's inhabitants rather than on its crimes—although the crimes Gastner and Reyes-Guzman investigate do cover the gamut from the brutal to the quixotic.

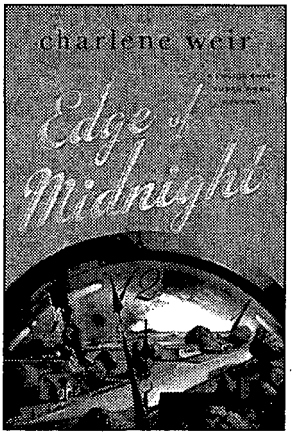
In FINAL PAYMENT (St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95), the latest installment, the local flavor, always so prominent, gets a regional boost from the inaugural Posadas 100, a hundred-mile bicycle race that traverses some very rugged country and poses considerable logistical problems for the organizers and for the sheriff's department. Meanwhile, one local

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reports that his private plane has been flown without his permission. When a remote and seldom-used airstrip is the scene of a triple homicide, Estelle starts to look for connections among the three events.

The bicycle race gives Havill license to explore some of the most rugged territory Estelle's forces must cover. The fatalities test not only the ingenuity of the local sheriffs and police departments, but also the cross-border cooperation with Mexican authorities. Nobody mines this colorful territory better than Havill, whose recurrent characters have garnered depth and increasing resonance from book to book.

EDGE OF MIDNIGHT (St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95) is the seventh entry in Charlene Weir's series featuring Police Chief Susan Wren of Hampstead, Kansas. The series began with 1992's *The Winter Widow*, which won the St. Martin's Press/Malice Domestic award for Best First Traditional Mystery, and has since grown slowly but steadily.



In *Edge of Midnight*, Susan Wren and her staff are faced with two often hidden crimes—spousal abuse and school bullying—and three women each trying to escape in some way—one from a stalker; one from an abusive husband who happens to be a police officer; and one, a sensitive teenager, from a school bully's taunts and rumors.

When Cary Black finally gets up the courage to leave her husband, she is goaded by the knowledge that she is going blind and will lose the one pleasure remaining in her life—reading. A friend arranges for her to stay with Kelby Oliver, who has moved to rural Hampstead to hide from a stalker. But when Cary arrives, she finds Kelby's house deserted. Cary, in a strange town, with no friends or money, assumes Kelby's identity.

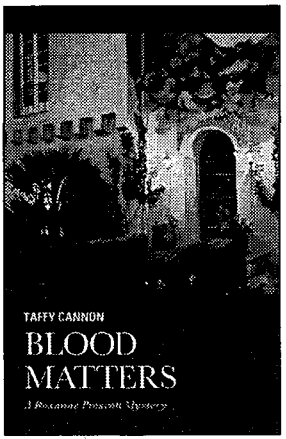
What happened to Kelby and what will happen to Cary provide the crux of the grim mystery, while Susan Wren's newest police officer, Ida Rather, provides some laughs as the eager recruit's enthusiasm may end up sidelining one or more of her colleagues.

Taffy Cannon has written a number of novels under her own name, such as the Nan Robinson mysteries, and the cozy Booked for Travel mystery series under the name of Emily Toll. *Guns and*

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Roses, which introduced Roxanne Prescott, earned her nominations for both the Agatha and Macavity awards.

Her fourteenth book, BLOOD MATTERS (Perseverance Press, $14.95) is the second to feature the rookie detective Roxanne Prescott, a fourth-generation law enforcement officer from Texas, who has joined the San Diego Sheriff's Department. She is now the newest member of the homicide squad headed by Lieutenant Sara Blair.



Roxanne and her partner, the more experienced Jed Wilkinson, investigate the death of Sam Brennan, the wealthy, eccentric, even visionary CEO of Adoption Central, after he is discovered bludgeoned in his home with a statuette of Michael Jackson. Brennan's colorful past—his adoption, his rise to wealth and prominence, his failed marriages—not to mention his tell-all book about adoption agencies—leads to a plethora of suspects, but to catch the killer, the ever-insightful Roxanne sets a clever trap.

Roxanne may be the focus, but a team of experts ably abets her, and she appreciates her partner's willingness to share both his expertise and investigative duties. Cannon handles the details of the adoption center with aplomb, and her writing has the verve to capture the Southern California setting, while the supporting characters are drawn with enough depth to keep the reader guessing until the very end.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: This May, Molly MacRae, whose series featuring sisters Bitsy and Margaret has graced the pages of AHMM, debuted her first novel WILDER RUMORS: A LEWIS WILDER MYSTERY (Five Star, $25.95), the tale of a museum curator accused of murder while a stylish burglar runs rampant in the rural South. Having spent twenty years in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and having worked as the curator of a history museum herself, MacRae writes with familiarity, wit, and charm.

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ACCOUNT CLOSED

WILLIAM LINK

Lieutenant Meltzer had never lost contact with Martin Herwitt over the years. Meltzer had been the chief homicide investigator on the case in which Herwitt's daughter had been brutally murdered by her husband. The admitted culprit, Neal Bevans, had pled insanity and had been incarcerated in a state mental institution until a panel of psychologists had pronounced him recovered from paranoid schizophrenia and believed he was no longer a threat to society.

Bevans had found Christ during his extended stay under state, tax-supported auspices, which Meltzer found somewhat suspicious since Bevans's Savior seemed to have established a second residence in prison, and an amazing number of felons sought to impress their parole boards with their newfound faith.

Bevans's release was seven years old now. He had remarried, fathered two children, and attended Mass at a church in Santa Monica where one also found the pre-gubernatorial Arnold Schwarzenegger and his family most Sundays. He now owned and was chef at a small, fairly popular, eclectic-food restaurant, Neal's, in the neighborhood where he had grown up.

The Bevans file had occupied only a dusty place in the back of Meltzer's mind when he received a call out of the blue from Herwitt, who suggested they get together for a drink.

They met at a tiny tavern (Herwitt's suggestion) only a few blocks from Bevans's restaurant, which immediately set off an alarm bell. Bevans was an obsession with the father, who had once told Meltzer that if his daughter's killer was ever freed he would shoot him down in the street. A Jewish gunfighter. *Please.*

Herwitt looked haunted. His once-fleshy, seventy-year-old face was emaciated, slowly crumbling from within, like an emotionally termite-tortured structure. "They've given me six months to live," he told Meltzer after he had taken a swallow of his double whiskey.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Martin." He was. "The smoking?"

Herwitt nodded, flinging a pack of cigarettes on the table. "I never smoked—until after Karen died." He took a drink. "How's your daughter? Sara Beth, was it?"

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"Good. She's good. This year she says she wants to be an anthropologist. I said okay, but no digs in the Middle East."

Herwitt made a valiant attempt at a smile. "You're blessed, Meltzer," he said. "I hope you realize that."

"I do, Martin, I do." He had known exactly how Herwitt and his wife had felt after the loss of their own child. This was the kind of loss that destroyed marriages and sanities. "The doctors—your doctors—don't hold out any hope at all?"

"No. I've had all the chemo, the newest drugs, I'm in the late fourth stage." He picked up the cigarette pack. "The funny thing is, I still want one of these."

Meltzer was stumped, at a loss at what to say.

Herwitt finished his whiskey. "Neal Bevans," he said.

"What about him?"

"I've heard his restaurant is so successful he might get the money to start another."

"Gasoline and justice," Meltzer said. "The supply keeps dwindling." He hoped that was a cynical but nonprovocative comment.

"You want to go over there for another drink?" Herwitt asked. "It's just down the street."

"No, I don't. And I don't recommend you going over there either."

Guilelessly, Herwitt asked, "How come?"

Meltzer looked at him. He could detect, he thought, a little pilot light of fanaticism behind the dull opacity of the eyes. "You remember what you used to tell me about Bevans?"

"How I would like to shoot him down in the street? I was just joking, Meltzer. You knew that."

Meltzer took a pull at his nonalcoholic beer. "Did I?"

"Do you really think Bevans got what he deserved? Fooled everybody with that phony insanity defense?"

"He fooled some highly qualified psychiatrists."

Herwitt's face had lost its pallor. "Hacks. Guys picking up state money because they can't make it in the marketplace, the real world. You going to deny that?"

"Why'd you want to meet tonight?"

"To fill you in on my medical condition." And now the smile came easily. "I'm not a man with ulterior motives, Meltzer."

Meltzer, in pajamas, was brushing his teeth prior to turning in. His wife Ruthie was busy flossing next to him at the twin sinks. "So what are you going to do?" she asked.

He spit into the sink. "Why do you always ask me questions when I've got foam in my mouth?"

"Because I know I'll get an honest answer."

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"You always get honest answers. What can I do? Nothing."

"So what was he doing, testing the waters?"

"For what reason? If he wants his revenge on Bevans he'll try and do it. If he succeeds, by the time his trial date comes up he'll be dead of natural causes. Foolproof."

Ruthie had stopped flossing and was looking at him in the mirror. "I think I know what you should do, and you do too. But is it kosher?"

"Ask Rabbi Werblow. Is trying to prevent a death kosher?"

Neal's restaurant was jammed in between a hole-in-the-wall sushi joint and the bright chrome façade of a frozen yogurt emporium. Meltzer got there after eleven, hoping the kitchen people and the waitresses had departed for the evening.

When he came in there was only a small cleaning crew vacuuming and wiping down counters in the trendy see-through kitchen. There was still the mild, tantalizing aroma of food and the lingering smoke from the wood grill.

Bevans spotted him and came out into the dimly lit dining room. He wore a white apron and white shirt but no toque. "Something I can do for you, sir?"

Meltzer sat down at one of the tables near the door and flipped open his wallet so Bevans could see his shield.

"I don't look familiar?"

Bevans came closer, peering hard at him. "Well . . . yeah. I knew you a long time ago?"

"Long time. Sit down. I was head investigator on the Herwitt homicide."

Bevans started to edge away. He was an unpretentious, husky redhead, early forties, with formidable biceps and a neatly trimmed red beard framing an unflinching, boyish face.

"Listen, I've been clean for—"

"I know," Meltzer interrupted. "You're as clean as my compulsive wife's kitchen. Sit down, this is unofficial."

Still edgy, Bevans pulled out a chair, sat. "What do you want with me?"

"Have you been contacted recently by Martin Herwitt?"

"No. I haven't talked to him or seen him in years."

Meltzer sighed. "Herwitt's got lung cancer. He might not be around very long."

Bevans thought about this. Meltzer noticed what looked like bloodstains on his apron. Cool it, schmuck, the guy's a cook.

"Right after the trial," Bevans said, "he told the press I was faking it, that he wanted to kill me."

"And?" Meltzer prodded. The crew was leaving, and someone was

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turning out most of the lights in the dining room.

"Look, I know what I did to Karen, but I was mental, out of control, helpless. I loved her. In a way I don't blame him if he's still so angry he can't see straight. But—"

"But you've paid for your crime, found God, and changed your life for the better. Not to mention you love your wife and kids."

"To the death." He smiled weakly. "Excuse me, I guess that's a very inappropriate phrase."

"You know, I can't protect you," Meltzer said flatly.

"No police protection? You gotta be kidding."

"Our hands are tied unless he actually attempts something."

"But give me a break, man, that might be too late."

Meltzer spread supplicating hands and saw, incongruously, that his nails were dirty. "Make sure you're not followed when you come here and when you leave. And elsewhere. I checked the Vehicle Registration—he drives a dark green '98 Buick." He jotted down the license plate number on the back of his business card, handed it to him.

"But what about my wife, my kids?"

"Do you have a daughter?"

Bevans was near trembling, his big hands clutching the clean, newly placed tablecloth. "No, two boys. You mean—"

Meltzer said, "You know what I mean. If you think he's following you or casing your house, I want you to call me immediately. You have the number on my card."

Bevans was still trying to steady his hands. "Jesus, what can I do?"

"Every Sunday at Mass? Pray."

Almost twenty-four hours later, Meltzer got a call on his cell phone. It was Bevans, his voice as unsteady as his hands had been. "He was here tonight."

"In your restaurant?"

"Where else? Came in late. Just kinda this average guy, by himself. Had a glass of wine, nice dinner, left a good tip, and left."

Meltzer was in their living room watching TV with his wife, whom he silenced with a finger to his lips. "Did you talk to him?"

"Nah. You know we got an open kitchen, so I could see him in the dining room, and he could see me."

"He made no effort at all to come near you?"

"Didn't even get up to go to the restroom."

"When he came in, you didn't tell him he was unwelcome, he should leave?"

Bevans's sigh had a stinging resonance in Meltzer's ear. "I didn't even think—I mean, I was so surprised. Hell, Lieutenant, I don't

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want any trouble with the ACLU for refusing a man service."

Meltzer would have laughed if the situation wasn't so serious. "Tell you what, Mr. Bevans. If he comes in tomorrow night, as soon as he steps in the door, call me."

"Good, I'll do that." Bevans sounded relieved. "And thanks for all the advice, Lieutenant. I've been doing a lot of extra praying. So's my wife."

Yeah, Meltzer thought grimly, so did many of the death camp inmates during the Holocaust. Hypocrite, he quickly chastised himself—he was doing a lot of worrying and praying himself these days.

Meltzer and his wife were on their way to the movies the next night when Meltzer's cell phone rang.

"Don't answer," Ruthie warned. She had waited weeks to see this picture.

"Yes?" Meltzer said to the phone.

It was a nervous Bevans. "Guess who has just walked in, settled himself at a table near the window."

"Let's hope he stays." Meltzer hung up and quickly flipped a U. They were only seven minutes away, a negligible amount of time to Los Angelenos who measured miles in minutes instead of distance.

"Herwitt again?" Ruthie asked, her eyes heavy on his face.

Meltzer nodded. "I don't have time to drive you all the way back home. You'll have to sit and have a cup of coffee."

"And a piece of pie," she said ruefully. "You think the owner will comp me?"

"Doesn't have to. He knows I'm good for it."

They came into the restaurant, Meltzer scanning the patrons at the table near the window. Yes, there was Herwitt, neat in herringbone jacket and tie, studying the menu. He already had a glass of wine at his elbow.

Meltzer pointed Ruthie to a faraway table and headed for Herwitt, exchanging a look with Bevans, who was taking ice cream from one of the gleaming fridges in the kitchen.

He took his time settling into a chair across from Herwitt. The man's face looked eggshell fragile, like an old fighter who'd had his facial bones rewired. Meltzer noticed a portable oxygen tank at his feet.

The menu lowered. "Bevans called you?" Herwitt asked, not unpleasantly.

"I told you you shouldn't be coming here," Meltzer said, his voice slightly hoarse.

"You talked to him, didn't you?" It was a nonaccusatory question, like asking about the traffic.

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Meltzer wasn't as pleasant. "What are you trying to do, intimidate him, wear him down?"

"Somebody said the food was very good here, reasonable. The doctor says I can have anything I want as long as it keeps my weight up."

A young, actress-looking waitress with spiky hair brought over Herwitt's order, a steaming bowl of spaghetti and meatballs. She looked at Meltzer. "Something for you?"

"Just a beer. Nonalcoholic."

"Which means you're on duty," Herwitt said smugly after the waitress had left.

"You thought maybe this was just a social call?" Meltzer said. "Look, Martin, whatever's in your head is crazy. You should get some help on this."

"You mean one of those shrinks who pronounced Bevans cured?" He coughed, held a handkerchief to his lips. "I take it you've warned Bevans to take precautions. But you know, don't you, that there's no way to really prevent a murder if someone is set on it, or even a suicide, for that matter."

"We have a damn fine psychiatrist downtown who'd be happy to have a talk with you."

Herwitt seemed to be enjoying his spaghetti, using a spoon to wind the strands. But his hands were frail, unsteady "Never believed in shrinks. Who said—was it Marx?—'Psychiatry is the disease that pretends to be the cure'?" His laugh degenerated into another cough.

If this keeps up, Meltzer thought wryly, I'm going to need a shrink myself. "Are you religious, Martin?"

"After my bar mitzvah—poof! My wife drags me to temple for some of the High Holidays folderol, but I'm not a believer. You think I should suddenly communicate with God, tell Him I've been on sick leave for fifty years? The Old Testament is a cavalcade of revenge stories, Meltzer. You should read it sometime."

"I'll be here."

"What do you mean?"

"Every night you come here, I'll be waiting."

Herwitt studied him, knew he wasn't joking. "Don't you have better things to do every night?"

Meltzer leaned back in his chair, saw Bevans watching them from the kitchen. "I hate to say it, Martin, but you're a lot more interesting than anything on the tube."

On the way home, Meltzer was silent. Ruthie placed a consoling hand on his on the steering wheel. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

"I've run out of options. I'd put a man on him twenty-four hours a day, but I don't have the money, the personnel, or the authorization."

"He should take his wife and kids and get out of town."

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Meltzer was silent again, annoyed as he started to catch the few lights on Pico Boulevard. Then he said, "There might be only one chance—the cancer will kill him before he can act. He could talk like a son of a bitch tonight, but he had an oxygen tank and he was coughing."

They were almost home when Meltzer's cell phone rang.

"Live it up," Ruthie said with a sour smile, "who cares anymore, we missed the movie."

Meltzer listened. No more than a few seconds later he said, "I'll be there," and clicked off.

He was shooting a U-turn in the sparse traffic when Ruthie said, "Who was that? Where are we going?"

"Back to Neal's. Five minutes ago Herwitt collapsed and died at the table."

It was immediately a major media story: Did Wife Killer Slay Father-in-law?

Meltzer came home after nine the next night, looking haggard and harassed. Ruthie was waiting for him at the door. "What happened?"

"Had to wait all day to get the autopsy results on Herwitt. How come those CSI folks on TV get it in two seconds every week?"

"What did it show?"

"Arsenic poisoning. Had to have been in that spaghetti and meatballs he was eating when I was with him. But the bowl was washed."

"My God." She came to him, folded her arms around him. He kissed her. "So what do you think?"

"Well, the prosecuting attorney thinks Bevans put the stuff in his pasta. Had it in for him. His kitchen people say he prepared the dish himself."

"What do you think?"

"Why would he do it in his own establishment knowing everybody knows his past and his connection with Herwitt?"

Still holding each other, he felt her flinch as a shudder ran down her spine. "And talking about food—I hope you didn't make me dinner tonight. For some strange reason, I seem to have lost my appetite."

A little after nine, Rabbi Joel Werblow dropped by. He was a serious young man, mid thirties, already losing his hair.

"Ruthie thought I should come over," he said hesitantly. "Said you were having some . . . difficulties."

"That's a kind way of putting it, Rabbi."

They settled in the living room, Sara Beth sentenced to do her homework sitting at the kitchen table. But Meltzer knew she was listening to every word.

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"Rabbi," Ruthie said, "my husband's got it in his head that he's culpable for what happened."

Werblow turned his slightly myopic eyes on Meltzer. "All I know about this is what I heard on the TV. Why culpable?"

"Because I took it on my own to warn Bevans that Herwitt wanted to kill him, knowing because of his health situation he would never pay for his crime."

The rabbi was far ahead of him. "But, Mr. Meltzer, didn't you consider it your duty? If you didn't warn the gentleman, Herwitt could have had a clear shot at him. The man paid for his sins, why should he be an open target of a man irrationally bent on revenge?"

Meltzer's smile was sad. "Herwitt tweaked me about how revenge is all over the Old Testament."

"So it is. But it seems we must leave revenge to our Maker. Am I wrong?"

"No. But don't you see what Bevans's defense will be if he's prosecuted?"

The rabbi touched fingers together, tip to tip, incongruously like a church steeple. "Yes. That he knew that Herwitt would try to kill him, so he acted in self-defense."

"You should have been a lawyer, Rabbi."

"I almost was, but my widowed mother insisted on rabbinical school. A very wise woman, it turns out."

Almost a year later, Harold Bevans was convicted and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Meltzer was still plagued with guilt even though he knew he would never learn the truth of what had really happened.

One day, still needing solace, he met with Werblow and told him his theory: Herwitt had planted the arsenic himself, knowing the poison would deliver him from the increasing pain of his inevitable death and that the hated killer of his daughter would probably pay the price. A frame that worked.

"We will never know if that's true, but I think we must accept the verdict," the rabbi said.

"But my God, Rabbi, he's leaving a wife and two children and a wrecked business. And he could be innocent."

Werblow nodded. His hand touched Meltzer's sleeve. "But at times it's best to look at the upside. At last he avoided being murdered, and even incarcerated he can still lead a decent, Christian life. A good example to his fellow inmates. I can't help Mr. Bevans, but does this give you any sense of relief?"

Meltzer smiled ruefully. "You know, I'm beginning to think your mom was a very wise woman indeed . . ."

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KILLING TIME

RHYS BOWEN

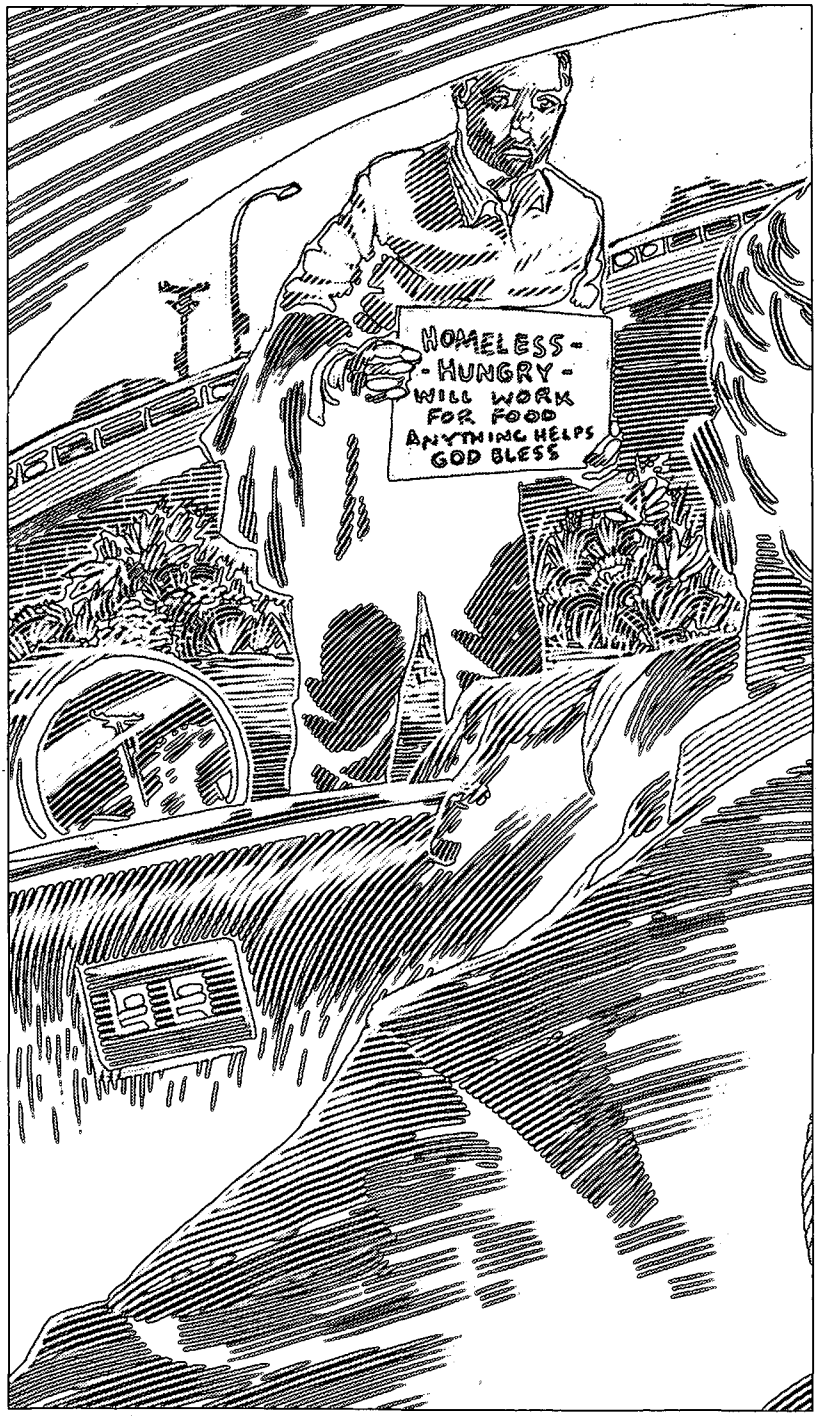
He woke to cold gray light. When he tried to move, his joints were stiff from half lying, half sitting too long in one position. His tongue felt dry and swollen, like an alien object in his mouth, and when he ran it experimentally over his teeth, he tasted furry stickiness that repulsed him. He sat up cautiously. The car windows had fogged up on the inside. He cleared a patch in the windshield and peered out. Outside was a world of indistinct shapes looming through the fog. It seemed to be foggy every day at this time of the year. Cold, foggy, and bleak. Was it Mark Twain who said the coldest winter he ever spent was a summer in San Francisco? Mark Twain! He smiled grimly. Mark Twain belonged to another world when he had lived as a civilized human being.

He held up his watch close to his face. Six thirty. Damn. Only six thirty. Why did he always have to wake so early? Why couldn't he ever sleep in until nine or ten? Now he had endless hours to kill until darkness fell again and he could drift into merciful sleep. A whole day ahead with nothing to do but mooch for food, read other people's newspapers, and hopefully find enough money for a drink. His life had been reduced to killing time. Christ, how did it ever come to this?

A year ago he would have been up by this time, off to the gym before work, or sitting at his desk, answering e-mails that couldn't wait. And Sandy would be making coffee. When she was in a good mood, she'd bring him a cup at his desk, and he'd turn to kiss her, and sometimes that led to things that made them both late for work. Sandy. Gone. Work. Gone. Life. Gone. What remained was a car that was scarcely running, a suitcase full of clothes, now all needing cleaning, a few books he couldn't bear to part with, some photos to remind him that he had once been a person.

How could it have happened so quickly? He had asked himself this question, over and over. Other people lose their jobs and bounce back. Other people's girlfriends stay with them in bad

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Tim Foley

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times. But he had to admit to himself that he had not been the easiest person to live with, even in good times. The typical type A male—driven, demanding, impatient, arrogant. And when the bad times came . . . he had driven her away.

"I'm going home to my folks for a while," she had said in her calm, gentle voice. "I need to decide what I want to do with my life." And she had gone.

Every day he had checked the online want ads, sent out a billion resumés, and waited for the job offers to come. Surely someone would want to snap up a dot-com exec with savvy and experience. But they didn't. Too many dot-com execs were floating around with similar savvy and similar experience, some of them willing to work for pennies. Ted had not been willing to compromise.

"Take a job, take any job," Sandy had urged. "It's always easier to find a job if you are working."

"You want me to work at McDonald's or Target, is that what you're saying?" he snapped.

"No, but you could take a lesser job within your industry. Work your way up again."

But he wasn't willing to do that either. He who had parked his gold Mercedes in a marked parking space was not going to be anyone's office boy. He was known in the industry. He couldn't stand the thought of the whispers and the looks. "Would you see what Ted Prescott has become?"

They had been living well, he and Sandy. He had been making six figures, and they had been spending those six figures with gay abandon as they came in: the fabulous home in the Los Gatos hills, the leased luxury cars, the weekends at the spa, vacations all over the globe. Savings? Who needed savings?

When Sandy had gone, he could no longer afford the rent. Sandy had urged him to buy a place, but he hadn't liked the thought of being weighed down by a mortgage or tied down. Tied down, that was it—he hadn't wanted to be tied down.

By the time he realized he'd have to move, he no longer had the credit nor the first and last month's rent required to move into a halfway decent place. He took a crummy apartment and then swallowed his pride and decided he'd take any job. But by then he had the desperate look of those who have been unemployed for a while, the look that makes employers think that this particular person might not be quite stable and reliable. He was only days away from considering McDonald's or Burger King when the last blow fell.

His car was involved in an accident. He was crossing on the last of a yellow when a big vehicle came barreling through on the red.

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He was in the hospital for two weeks. The driver of the other car happened to be a South Bay politician—with good connections and lots of lawyer friends. Ted was cited for running a red light. What's more, he couldn't stand long enough to work anymore. That's when the rest of his stuff went, when he sold his gold cufflinks, his art work on eBay. He might have swallowed his pride and driven cross country to Sandy if his car had not been written off in the crash. And the amount of money the insurance gave him only bought him this old banger that smoked and hiccupped and threatened to die on him. No way to escape then. Unemployment ran out. Hope ran out.

Ted sighed. He reached into the paper bag beside him and drew out the remains of a sandwich he had picked up the night before from a trash bin. He had heard that the Missionaries of Charity drove around handing out food, but he was still too proud to line up with those sorry losers. That was why he kept to the area around Golden Gate Park and Ocean Beach. There were shelters and food handouts downtown, but he wasn't yet ready to identify himself as a homeless person, a failure. Every now and then he went to an Internet cafe and searched to see if anyone had found his resumé and was finally offering him the job he deserved. But there were no e-mails anymore.

He'd better be moving soon. The park police started touring and ticketing around eight. He took out a comb and made a half-hearted attempt to restore some order to his unruly curls that were in sorry need of trimming. Then he walked over the wet grass to a men's room, washed his face in cold water, and cleaned his teeth. There were still certain standards to be maintained. He wasn't going to sink to the level where personal hygiene no longer mattered. He attempted to shave, but his electric razor had run out of charge. The cold water and dime-store razor only managed to yank out the worst of the stubble. He considered changing his shirt, but a quick check of the suitcase revealed no clean clothes at all. Somehow he'd have to come up with the money for a laundromat. What would happen if he got a job interview right now, with no suit pressed and clean, no white shirt? He made up his mind. Today he would do what had been repugnant to him until now. Today he would beg.

He went back into the car and made a crude sign. HOMELESS. HUNGRY. WILL WORK FOR FOOD. ANYTHING HELPS. GOD BLESS.

He'd seen the signs often enough and the suckers who rolled

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down their windows with the odd dollar. He decided to try his luck in one of the parking lots along the Great Highway. This was a popular spot on the tourist route. They'd come to see the view at Cliff House and then drop down to the beach below.

The car refused to start for some minutes but finally spluttered to life. He drove to the parking lot and sat waiting for the day to start. Maybe by tonight he'd have a hot meal and some clean clothes. The seeds of hope sprang up in his brain. If this worked well enough, he might have enough to fix the car and to drive himself east. He pictured Sandy coming out of her parents' house in Pennsylvania, her face lighting up when she saw him, as she rushed to enfold him in his arms. And he would apologize for being such an arrogant bastard and promise never, ever to yell at her again.

Cars started arriving. He stood at the highway turnoff, sign in his hands, resigned look of saintly suffering on his face. Most drivers looked the other way as they drove past. One wound down the window and yelled, "Get a job, you lazy bum."

"I've been trying, sir," he yelled back. "I'm willing to take anything. Do you have a job for me?"

Then the man had turned red and drove on, rather too fast.

By the end of the morning he had made a dollar. This was not a good spot then, he decided. He'd probably have to catch the bus and go downtown like the rest of them. And then he'd have to find some turf that was not already taken. He didn't relish a run-in with a crazed homeless person.

Around two o'clock a Lexus drove past him, turned at the end of the parking lot, and then drove back. A man in an expensive-looking suit got out. Everything about him said "executive"—immaculate hair, graying at the temples, striped tie, well-polished shoes. He beckoned to Ted. Ted came.

"Here," he said. "I had to take my lunch to go, but I'm not really hungry. You have it."

He handed Ted a take-out box. Ted had the dignity not to open it to see what goodies it contained.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "Much appreciated."

The man eyed him. "You look familiar," he said.

Ted had been thinking the same thing. In his past life they had run into each other. But he wasn't about to admit to it.

"I don't think we move in the same circles," he said.

The man continued to eye him critically. "So you need a job, do you?"

"I do. Desperately. I can't go on living like this."

"I may have something for you," the man said. "Do you know the vista point above the Crystal Springs Dam on 280?"

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Ted nodded.

"And do you have transportation?"

"I have a car that just about goes."

"Will it make it that far?"

"I hope so."

"Then meet me there at eight tonight. I may have something that might interest you."

"All right. Thanks. I'll be there."

The man nodded and got back into the Lexus. Ted watched him drive away. Eight tonight at a vista point. This wasn't a run-of-the-mill job then. Not "I'd like you to clear some brush in my garden." Possibly something illegal. But the man hadn't looked like a criminal type. There was definitely something familiar about him. He looked solid, respectable, not at all sleazy. Besides, a job was a job. If this man was part of Ted's old world, then maybe this was the first rung back on the ladder to normal life. He would do the job well, the man would be impressed. He would offer Ted a real job, a salary, his old life back.

Ted went to the nearest bench and opened the lunch box. It contained a grilled salmon steak on polenta, baby greens, mango salsa. And it was still warm. Ted ate with relish, savoring the subtle flavors he had missed for so long. Just as he was finishing up he heard a parent yelling, "Leave that and get back in the car. We have to go." And to his delight he saw a child reluctantly put down a half finished McDonald's soda. A crisp pinot grigio would have gone better with the salmon, but the Coke came a close second. This is it, he told himself. Finally his luck had changed.

That evening he went back to the washroom in the park, attempted to slick down his hair, found his cleanest shirt and a tie, and then prayed the car would start. During the day he had collected three more dollars, and he put these into a gallon of gas to make sure he could get there and back. Then at seven he drove south down 280, out of the city to where the highway skirts a long ribbon of lake, nestled in a valley with soaring hills to the west. It is, in fact, the main reservoir for the city of San Francisco, but the setting is spectacular. It was almost dark now, of course, but the sky still glowed beyond the western mountains, etching the black outline of their crests against the pink of the sunset.

He saw the turnoff for the vista point. Closed from sunset to sunrise, the sign said. He hoped there was no one there to check. There wasn't. He parked and got out, listening to the hum of the freeway beneath him and watching the first fingers of fog creeping over the mountains from the ocean.

On the dot of eight he saw the lights of a car swing up the slope

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toward him. Before the car reached him the headlights were extinguished and the big, black shape glided into the parking space beside him. A tall shadow got out.

"You came. Good." The man came to join him at the railing. "Nice view up here, isn't it? I sometime stop off here on my way home, just to collect my thoughts."

Ted couldn't think of anything to say, so he remained silent.

"You still want the job?" the man asked.

"Of course. That's why I'm here."

"Do you have a steady nerve?" the man asked. "It's not exactly a run-of-the-mill assignment."

"I didn't think it would be, meeting in a deserted parking lot in the middle of the night."

The man chuckled. "A sense of humor. I like that." There was a long pause and then he said, "I want you to kill my wife."

Ted leaped away as if he had been burned. "Kill your wife? Hey, wait a minute."

"I said it wasn't a run-of-the-mill assignment."

"But I didn't expect . . ." Ted stammered, ". . . I mean, I'm not the man you want for something like that. I don't care how badly I need the money . . ." He started to walk away.

"There will be fifty thousand in it for you," the man called softly after him. "Fifty thousand. Think of it. A new start, somewhere far away. Isn't that what you want?"

"Yeah, but . . ." Ted was sweating. He could feel the cold beads on his forehead. "Killing your wife? I mean, if you want out of the marriage why don't you just walk away? Get a divorce? This isn't the Dark Ages."

"Listen, buddy," the man said, "you'd be doing the world a favor. This woman is a manipulative schemer. She delights in making people miserable, especially me. You see, it was her daddy's money that set me up in business. She's never let me forget it. And it's her house. I'm jerked around like a puppet—it has to be what she wants, what she likes. Her life, not mine. She's told me many times that if I try to walk out, she'll ruin me. And she will. Her father is still a powerful man. I'm trapped, buddy. Trapped in a loveless marriage with no way out. You're my only hope."

"Why me?" Ted said. "Why don't you do it yourself, if that's what you want?"

"Don't you see? I'd be the obvious suspect. That's why I need a watertight alibi. When she's being shot, I'll be at a meeting in L.A."

"And how am I supposed to carry this out without getting caught?"

"It's all thought out, down to the last meticulous detail," the

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man said. "Believe me, I've been over and over it on all those sleepless nights. It's a perfectly simple plan—one that can't fail and has virtually no risk to yourself."

"How so?"

"I'm not going to reveal any details until I know that you're in. I don't want this conversation to come back to haunt me later." He paused again. "So do you want the job, or should I find someone else?"

"Fifty thousand dollars. That's a lot of money."

"It is. It would mean the difference between life and death for you, wouldn't it?"

Ted nodded. "How would I get paid?"

"In hundred dollar bills. When you'd done the job."

"Just a minute. What guarantee do I have that you'd pay up and not double-cross me? I want the money in advance."

"And have you catch the next plane to God knows where? I haven't built up a successful business by being stupid, you know. But I have become a good judge of character. I knew when I saw you begging on the street that you weren't the usual homeless bum. I saw that you'd been somebody, that you wanted to be somebody again. I'm offering you that chance, buddy. And if you do right by me, if you free me from this nightmare, then I swear to God I'll do right by you."

Ted shifted uneasily, his feet crunching on dry grass at the edge of the parking lot.

"I'll want a token payment so that I can have an air ticket already booked to get away."

"Fair enough. I'll give you five thousand. You'll get it with the final details."

"And the rest?"

"You'll find the rest in the note that tells you where to dispose of the gun."

Ted's heart was hammering so loudly that he was sure the man could hear it in the stillness of the clear night air.

"Might I know your name?" he asked.

"No names. I don't want to know your name. You don't know mine. Easier that way all around."

Ted tried to collect his racing thoughts. "You said there would be no risk in it for me."

"I live in Woodside," the man said. "Do you know it?"

"Yes," Ted said. He started to add, "I used to live in the Los Gatos Hills myself," but then thought better of it.

"My property backs up to open space. There's a walking trail that passes close to our garden. Every morning at seven my wife

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goes out walking on that trail. She goes through the little gate in the side wall. You'd be in the garden, waiting in the bushes by the gate. As she pauses to punch in the security number, you shoot her in the back. She'll never know what hit her. You'll make your exit. The housekeeper doesn't arrive until nine, and we'll be lucky if anyone finds her that day. By then she'll be long dead and you'll be far away. So will I."

"What if someone hears the shot?"

"That trail is very little used during the week, and there are no houses close to us. It's a perfect situation."

"You want me to shoot her from inside your yard, right? How do I get in?"

"The security code for the front gate will be with the gun."

"Which will be where?"

The man chuckled. "Too much info at once. I need to put all my own plans into place. Stick around that parking lot on Ocean Beach every morning. When you see me, don't do anything. I'll drop off the information into the trashcan nearest you. Don't pick it up until I've driven away."

"It's like a spy thriller, isn't it?" Ted had to laugh. Then he shook his head. "Look, I've never shot anybody before."

"I should hope not. Ever used a gun?"

"Yeah. I did go target shooting with a friend a couple of times when I was younger."

"And were you any good?"

"Not bad."

"You'll be fine. You'll be completely hidden."

"What about dogs?" Ted asked suddenly.

"No dogs. Bernice doesn't like mess. Everything has to look perfect all the time. It's like living in a furniture catalog."

There was a long silence while the two men stared out at the first stars.

"I could take this information straight to the police," Ted said.

"You could, but what would that achieve? You'd get nothing out of it. It wouldn't hurt me either. There would be no crime to prosecute, and I'd just have to put my plans on hold and find another way to kill Bernice. And I promise you, buddy—you try to screw me and you'll be sorry. I don't play nice with people who try to double-cross me." He turned away from the rail. "All up to you, buddy."

Without saying another word he opened his car door and got in. Ted watched as the big car backed away.

Every day that week he parked at Ocean Beach, but the car didn't come. He had just decided that the man had lost his nerve when

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he saw it. He watched the bag tossed idly into the trashcan and the car accelerating once more. It was all he could do to stroll nonchalantly to the trashcan and pick up the bag.

"Poor thing," he heard a woman say. "Look, he has to scavenge in trashcans for something to eat. Give him a dollar, Herb."

"The guy's a bum, Martha. Let him get a job like everyone else."

And the voices drifted away. Ted hardly noticed. He saw that the bag contained an envelope—a fat, bulging envelope. He put it into his trouser pocket, then got back in his car. When nobody was around he opened it and gazed upon the hundred dollar bills. Five thousand. The first installment, enough for an air ticket to Philadelphia, new clothes, a new identity. And after the deed was done, enough money to get started in a new life with Sandy. His eyes started to tear up at the thought of seeing her.

The envelope also contained a single piece of paper on which was typed an address, directions, and the numbers that had to be a security code. And at the bottom of the page "Thursday, August 2nd."

That gave him one week to prepare. During that time he got the car tuned up so that it wouldn't let him down; he bought new clothes and luggage and a one-way plane ticket to Philadelphia. He checked into a nearby motel and luxuriated in a hot shower and shave for the first time in weeks.

Then early on the morning of August 2, he drove down Highway 280 to Woodside. It was a typical August morning with white fog spilling over the coastal mountains and hovering over the lakes. Woodside Road took him through the old village, with its deceptively rural setting, then it started to climb past luxury homes set back amid lush gardens. He found the house easily enough. It was the last one on a leafy dead-end street. As the man had promised, it was surrounded by a high brick wall and set well apart from any neighbors. Ted turned the car so that it was ready to drive away and left it parked under a large oak tree.

The area was still heavy with fog, and when he opened the car door, he found himself in an eerily muted world of indistinct shapes and muffled sounds.

"Perfect," he said to himself, but then he began to worry. What if it was too foggy for a morning walk? He crossed the road and approached the house under cover of the wall. Near the front gate he located a drain cover. He lifted it up and drew out a black plastic bag. In the bag, wrapped in cloth, was the gun, a stylish Colt that felt heavier than Ted expected, and a sheet of instructions. It detailed the route he was to take up into the mountains and hollow tree where he was to leave the gun and pick up directions to his money.

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He felt surprisingly calm as he approached the front gate. He found the security box easily enough and punched in the numbers. The big gate swung open. Ted glanced up, wondering if he was being observed, but the house was scarcely visible through the trees and the fog. He heaved a sigh of relief as the gate swung shut again. He made his way around the perimeter of the property until he came upon the small side gate in the wall. The path leading to it from the house was bordered with thick shrubs, as the man had described. All Ted had to do was choose the perfect spot. He tried several and then settled on a space between two rhododendrons. From that vantage point he could see her coming and then have a perfect target as she punched in the security numbers and waited for the gate to open.

The gun felt cold and heavy in his sweaty hands as he waited. He pictured shooting another human being, the body sprawling forward, the blood, maybe an anguished cry. What if he didn't kill her with the first shot? Would he have the nerve to stand over her and calmly finish her off? He shook his head violently and the shake turned into a shudder that ran down his whole body. He couldn't do it. There was no way . . . He started to emerge from his hiding place. He'd leave the gun, get on that plane, and just go.

Then the words "fifty thousand" buzzed around inside his head. Fifty thousand. Enough to buy a little business, put a down payment on a house, get a life again. He could do it. He was going to do it. He had to do it. He patted the inside pocket of his jacket with the air ticket in it. By tonight he'd be in Philadelphia. By tonight the nightmare would be over.

He looked up as he heard the crunch of feet on gravel. She was coming. Seven o'clock on the dot. Blood roared in his head as he readied the weapon. As she passed him his first impression was of the bright blue jogging suit and blond hair. His second impression was that she was younger than he had expected. She reached the gate and turned to the security box. She was pretty, too, with a fresh, wide-eyed look, hair tied back in a ponytail.

There had to be something wrong. This couldn't be the wife who had made the man's life hell for years. His daughter, maybe? But he hadn't mentioned children and she was probably a little old for a daughter. Maybe face-lifts and cosmetics made her look younger than she really was. The gun shook in his hand as he tried to keep it steady. And then, as she reached up to shut the security box, he noticed something else. She was pregnant—her belly stretching out the blue jogging pants to their limit.

He stood in the bushes holding his breath while she opened the gate, jogged out of the yard, and the gate closed behind her. Then

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he didn't know what to do next. He waited a while, but nobody else came. Then he turned and began to blunder back to the front gate. The man would understand. Surely the man would understand that there was no way he could shoot a pregnant woman. He'd leave a note with the gun. And then he'd catch that plane. He couldn't be traced to Philadelphia. The guy didn't even know his name.

He reached the gate and pushed. The gate didn't move. He swore under his breath and looked for the security box. He found it, retrieved the piece of paper from his pocket, and punched in the numbers. Nothing happened. His breath was coming in ragged gasps now. It couldn't require a different code to exit—in which case, why hadn't he been given it? He shook the gate, rattled it, charged at it with his shoulder, but it didn't budge. In panic he looked up at the wall. It was topped with jagged glass and well above his reach. He ran back through the garden to the side gate and tried the code he had been given. Nothing. He closed his eyes and tried to picture the woman punching in numbers. He must have noticed subconsciously which numbers she pushed. But then he realized that he had been focused on her belly, not her hand.

Trapped. The words echoed around his head. How was he ever going to get out?

Calm down, he told himself. There has to be a way. I'll find a wheelbarrow in a shed and push it over to the wall. Or a plank. Or something. Somewhere in this garden there is something that can get me out of here.

He worked his way around with little success until he came to the toolshed. It was locked, but he found a rock and worked on smashing the padlock. He was vaguely aware of sounds, muffled by the fog; but it took him a while to realize they were sirens. He jumped up. A security system. He'd been picked up by a security system. They were coming after him. He had to think of a good story and quickly.

Hide. There must be somewhere to hide in a garden this size. He started to run, willing his damaged leg not to let him down. Those bushes by the side gate would give him protection, unless there had been a security camera trained on him all the time, or they had brought dogs—or both. Shit, he muttered. Security system. He should have thought of that. But why had the guy not mentioned it—unless . . . cold sweat ran down his spine . . . unless it had been part of the plan that he be trapped and caught red-handed with the gun.

The gun—it was still in his pocket. He wrenched it out and threw it into the thickest shrubs he could find. He hadn't quite

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reached the safety of the bushes when the side gate opened in front of him and the young pregnant woman entered, with two policemen behind her.

"I saw the car I didn't recognize," she said, "so I thought I should call you guys, with Daniel gone and all."

"You did the right thing, miss," the officer said, but the last of his sentence was drowned by the young woman's scream as she pointed at Ted.

"There he is!"

Ted had been frozen like a rabbit caught in headlights. He turned to run, only to find another officer behind him, gun already drawn.

"Hold it right there, buddy."

It flashed through Ted's mind that nobody had called him buddy in his life until this week, and now it seemed that everyone was doing it.

"Get your hands up."

Ted complied. "Look, officers, there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this," he said, trying desperately to think of one. "I'm a gardener. A specialist. In roses. The usual gardener asked me to take a look at the roses and see what was wrong with them. Blight, he thought. That's how I got in. He gave me the code."

He kept talking as he was patted down from top to toe.

The officer backed away and nodded. "Okay. Easy enough to check. You can come with us down to the police station and give us all the details while we check out the place to make sure nothing has been touched."

"I swear I haven't been near the house," he said.

"Then you've nothing to worry about, have you?" The first officer jerked the gun. "Hands behind your back." And he was handcuffed. The cold metal bit into his wrists. Calm down, he told himself. You have nothing to worry about. There is nothing they can pin on you. They'll have to let you go.

He was thrust into the back of the police car and asked for his car keys. He watched as one of the officers started to search the car. They'd find his bag, of course. But nothing else incriminating. They'd have to let him go. He'd tell them about the flight. Show them his ticket and then they'd have to let him go.

The Woodside police station was neither cutesy nor rural, but housed in a new civic building. He was taken to a room, the cuffs were removed, and he was fingerprinted. The contents of his pockets were examined, his watch was removed, then he was taken to an interview room, told to sit in a chair and wait. At last a different policeman came in, this one not in uniform but wear-

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ing a white shirt, open at the collar, and well-cut chinos. Behind him a uniformed officer stood at attention, his hands fingering the weapon at his side.

"Hi there, Mister?"

"Prescott. Edward Prescott."

"How are you, Mr. Prescott. I'm Lieutenant Hansen. Address?"

"I'm just visiting, from Philadelphia," Ted said. "I've been staying at the Ocean Lodge motel the past few days. I'm due to fly back home today. If you take a look at what they removed from my pockets, you'll see the ticket there."

"And just what did you say you were doing at the Huntley house?"

"Like I told your officers, I'm a gardener—a plant specialist. I was asked to take a look at the roses."

"Is that so?"

Ted nodded.

"Who asked you?"

"I don't know exactly. The gardener, I suppose. I was contacted by e-mail. Just sent the pertinent information. I've got the print-out sheet in my pocket."

The lieutenant smiled and nodded. Ted relaxed a little. He was rather pleased at the way this was going. Thinking on his feet again, as he had done in the old days when he'd been in the cut-throat dot-com business. The old Ted starting to emerge.

"And you never went near the house?"

"No. I had no need to. I was looking for the rose bushes in the garden."

The lieutenant produced a notebook. "I'll need your address in Philadelphia, Mr. Prescott. And your cell phone number and e-mail. All your details."

"But I've just told you . . . I've just explained. Look officer, I've a plane to catch. And I can't give you a Philadelphia address because I'm in the process of moving. I can give you someone who can vouch for me—" and he tried to remember Sandy's address off the top of his head.

"Thank you, sir. This shouldn't take long. If you're in the clear, then you can catch that plane." Lieutenant Hansen nodded and was about to leave when his phone rang. Ted heard the officer say, "What? You're kidding me. Lucky, huh?" and then a low conversation followed. From time to time he glanced at Ted. Then he said, "So you're a gardener, huh? Nowhere near the house? Then I expect you'd be completely surprised to hear that Mrs. Huntley has been found shot to death in her bed."

"What?" It came out almost as a shriek. "She was alive. I saw her."

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"Then you were in the house!"

"What? No, I told you. Nowhere near the house. She went jogging. And then she came back. With your men."

"I'm talking about Mrs. Bernice Huntley, Daniel Huntley's wife."

"Then who was the young woman who went jogging?"

"I gather that was Mr. Huntley's secretary who only happened to show up by chance."

Ted's thoughts were in turmoil. More than anything was the awful realization that he might have shot a completely innocent, uninvolved woman by mistake. Then it occurred to him that perhaps she wasn't innocent at all. Young, pretty, pregnant, and probably involved with her boss. Maybe she had decided to take matters into her own hands to improve her situation.

"Then I suggest you question this secretary," he said, "because she was just leaving the compound as I arrived."

"We'll definitely do that, Mr. Prescott." Lieutenant Hansen turned to the officer behind him. "Take him to a holding cell, Rogers. I expect we'll have more questions to ask Mr. Prescott when I've taken a look at the crime scene."

Ted was led away, hardly aware of where he was going or what he was doing.

"In you go, buddy." A friendly shove propelled him into a cell and the door clanged shut behind him. Ted sat on the hard metal bench. The metal felt cold through his thin pants and he couldn't stop shivering. Mistake. There had to be some mistake. They'd have to believe that he didn't kill anybody. Well, he knew one thing. If his life was on the line, he wasn't holding back on any information. He'd let them know about Mr. Huntley and the conversation they had at the vista point.

After what seemed like hours, he was brought a mug of coffee and a turkey sandwich. His stomach was growling for food, but when he tried to swallow, the bread just wouldn't go down. He managed a few sips of coffee. He'd obviously missed his flight. He got up, paced, and sat down again. He had no idea how long he'd been there, whether it was day or night when an officer came to fetch him and he was escorted back to the interview room. This time Lieutenant Hansen was joined by an older detective and several uniformed officers.

"Mr. Prescott," the lieutenant said, all the time eyeballing him. "I'm about to read you your rights. I guess you know what that means, don't you?"

"You're about to charge me with a crime."

"Bingo." The lieutenant began his recitation. Right to remain silent. Right to counsel. "Do you have an attorney you'd like to call?"

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Ted tried to remember the name of the attorney he had used when he had been sued for patent infringement and various other legal problems. In the dot-com business there had always been minor legal problems, always someone else convinced that he'd come up with an idea first. Ted remembered one occasion when he had hired a great attorney and won a particularly tricky case. But then that guy had been down in Sunnyvale and he'd specialized in patent law. No help to someone about to be charged with a murder. He shook his head.

"Mr. Prescott," the older detective said in a fatherly voice. "If you'd like to give us a confession right now, we'll make it easy on you. As easy as possible. You've been through a bad time—the stress of life on the streets, temporary insanity. We understand."

"Look," Ted said, "I didn't do it. I didn't kill anybody."

"We've found the gun, Mr. Prescott," Lieutenant Hansen said calmly. "Recently fired. Same caliber bullet that shot Mrs. Hansen through the head while she was asleep—and your fingerprints all over it. Seems like an open and shut case to me."

"But I didn't shoot her." Ted could hear himself shouting now. "I've been set up, don't you see? Look, I'll tell you the whole story and you'll see how I was set up. This Mr. Huntley asked me to meet him at a vista point. He offered me fifty thousand to kill his wife. He had the whole thing arranged. He told me how to get in, where to pick up the gun, where to drop it off. He told me his wife went walking every morning at seven and told me where to stand by that side gate. As you probably now know, I needed money desperately, or I'd never have agreed in the first place. But I did what I was told. I found the gun where it had been hidden. I entered the garden with the code he gave me, and at seven on the dot that young woman appeared. Well, I knew right then that I could never shoot a pregnant woman, so I let her go. But then I couldn't get out. That's when you guys found me. But I swear I never went near the house. I thought the pregnant woman was Mrs. Huntley."

The policemen were staring at him with impassive faces.

"I can prove it," he said. "Among the stuff you took from my pockets was the piece of paper with directions for dropping off the gun and collecting the money. Go check that out. And the gun. Check out the gun and see who it's registered to."

"We've already done that, sir," Lieutenant Hansen was looking smug now. "It was bought in Reno last week. The purchaser identified himself as a Mr. Edward Prescott. You bought the gun, sir. Your fingerprints and only yours are on it. You are guilty as hell, Mr. Edward Prescott, and the sooner you admit it, the better for all of us."

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Ted was taken back to his cell. There was one blanket on the bench and he draped it around his shoulders, trying to stop shaking. Nightmare. Mr. Huntley had promised him the nightmare would end, but it was never going to end now. How could he have trusted that jerk, believed him, when all the time he was being set up. The sucker. Disposable. Utterly and completely disposable. Then a new thought surfaced through the turbulent waters of his brain. No names, the guy had said. But he had known Ted's name. He had bought a gun in Ted's name. How was that possible?

Then another thought joined the first. Huntley. Lawyers. Patent infringement case. Sunwire Systems versus Ridgeway-Huntley. He'd hired a good lawyer and he had won, against all odds. He'd heard that Ridgeway-Huntley were furious. He'd laughed at the time. A courtroom scene slowly formed itself in his head. And he knew why the man had looked vaguely familiar. He had been there, in that courtroom. And even as Ted pictured it, his brain moved to another scene: that night at vista point, and Huntley saying pleasantly, "You screw me and you'll be sorry. I don't play nice with people who try to double-cross me."

And he had to admit, grudgingly, that Huntley had certainly pulled off a good one this time. Two birds with one stone. He wasn't entirely surprised when the search of the hollow tree in the mountains turned up nothing.

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PUBLIC IMMUNITY

EVE FISHER

The sight of Neil Inveig, lying on the floor of his bedroom, naked except for his socks, was an instant flashback to Barry's freshman year. I'd gone to his dorm to get him so we could drive home together and found Barry so hungover he could hardly talk and Neil passed out on the floor, looking pretty much the way he did now.

"Hell of a party," Barry had managed to gasp out. "You should have come. Lots of booze. Neil brought girls. I think I'm dying."

I'd glanced at Neil and said, "Looks like he did."

Barry had turned even greener. "Oh crap. What're we gonna do? If the RA . . ."

"He's breathing," I'd said.

This time he wasn't. There was a sticky dark cap of blood on the back of his blond head; blood spattered on his shoulders, his back, his furniture, his room. Someone had finally nailed him.

"There is a God," I said.

"What the hell are you doing here, Grant?" Detective Jonasson snapped.

"I'm on duty."

"Not here you're not."

"Hey, I just answered the call like everybody else."

He glared at me as the coroner came in, clucking, "Hey, Grant, John."

"Randy."

He squatted down by Neil. "All done?"

"You can have him," Jonasson said.

I didn't really want to watch Randy at work, but I also didn't want to leave, so I went over to the dresser. It was covered with white dust, and there was an ashtray full of cigarette butts and roaches. "Shame he's not alive," I commented. "We could finally bust him."

Jonasson grunted. Only a year ago I'd caught Neil out on 34 barreling back from the casinos with a beer in his crotch, empties under the seat, and a smoldering half smoked joint on the floor. I'd

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thought, at last I've got the son of a bitch. Yeah, right. Somehow his lawyer had the pot charges tossed out and plea-bargained the DUI down to reckless driving. Neil had been pissed he'd had to plead guilty to anything.

I glanced back—they were rolling Neil over—and turned back to the dresser. Julie smiled at me from among the cluster of photos.

Of all the five thousand reasons to hate Neil Inveig, most people thought Julie was at the top of the list. My high school and college sweetheart who dumped me for Neil two months before we were supposed to get married. They say you never forget your first love. Maybe she was Neil's too.

It startled me when Jonasson asked, "What're you looking at?"

"Julie," I said, pointing at the photo.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, more sad than anything else.

"I said I'd—"

"I know what you said. Get out of here."

"Yes, sir."

I drifted through the house until I found Bob in the den, getting ready to pop a videotape into a VCR.

"Grant," he said, "what are you doing here?"

"Same as you, answering the call of duty."

"Oh. Sure." Bob was easier than Jonasson. "Watch this." In a minute, the screen was full of hardcore banging. A young guy—local lowlife name of Todd Johnson—and a woman Bob and I both recognized. That went on for some time. Then there was a jump, and the woman (I'm not going to name her because she's married and it never came out in court) was gone, and Neil joined Todd. It only took Bob about thirty seconds to switch it off. "What do you think?"

I looked at the two shelves of videotapes, each labeled with the word "party" and a date on it. "I think we'd better box them up," I said. So we did.

I saw *Serpico* back in high school and knew right then I wanted to be a cop. I went to college, got my degree in criminal justice, and tried to get a job in the city, where I could go undercover and be cool. Didn't happen. I ended up back in Laskin. A small town has a small police department: There are eight of us, and I'm one of the patrolmen. It's a quiet beat: domestics, DUIs, drugs, some robberies, a lot of juvenile stuff, traffic violations, not much else. A lot of trivia no big city cop would ever have to deal with. I've never rescued any cats, but I have gone to check out a burst water heater at three in the morning. Idiots didn't know where the valve was to shut it off.

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It's not exciting, but it can be satisfying, once you accept the fact that it's not Mayberry, and there's a nasty streak in everybody. And some are nastier than others. For instance, and my primary one, I'll admit, Neil. Rich—his family business went back a hundred years—he was also handsome, witty, and oh so popular. My own mother once said there was no one like Neil to give life to a party. Of course, that was before Barry got mixed up with him.

The other side of Neil was that he was a user and a dealer. Everyone knew it. It was talked about all over town. But nothing ever happened to him. Other people, kids, lowlifes, the endless list of Davisons, got busted, convicted, did their time, but never him. Public immunity. And more. After I saw *Serpico*, I raved about it at school, and Neil raised his eyebrows and sniped, "Yeah, he was real bright. The only guy in New York City who didn't know the police were on the take." Even then, everything got smoothed over, taken care of, covered up for him.

So who was on the take? Or was it even a matter of being on the take? Was it just that he was an Inveig? Or was it the money? Whichever, whenever Neil screwed up it was hushed up as quickly as possible. Now that he was dead, I wondered if Saint Peter would be like everybody else . . .

Later that afternoon Jonasson called me into his office.

"I gotta ask, Grant. Where were you last night?"

"Me? Home, asleep. My shift started at six this morning."

"Anybody with you?"

"No."

"Now don't get pissed off. I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't check things out."

"Yeah, sure. All the possible suspects? You think I killed him? Went in and cracked his skull last night? John, if I was gonna do that, I'd have done it back when Julie dumped me."

"I know."

"And that was five years ago. I'm over it."

"And Barry?"

I ignored that. "I didn't kill him. I'm not sorry he's dead, I'm not going to pretend I am, but I did not kill him."

"Now look, Grant, I never said—"

"I know you never said. I'm answering what you didn't say."

"Okay, okay."

"Can I go?"

"Sure. Oh, and one more thing. I don't want you going near Inveig's place. You shouldn't ever have gone there at all." I rolled my eyes. "You hear me?"

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"Yes, sir," I said and snapped to attention.
"Get the hell out of here."

I went home and found Barry sitting on my deck. My little brother, who went from law student to dishwasher in less than five years. He'd idolized Neil in high school, and in college had bent over backward to become part of Neil's circle. He ended up being something between Neil's court jester and kicking dog. In exchange, he'd gotten all the drugs he could handle and more. When he finally got busted, he weighed a hundred pounds and looked like walking death. He regained the weight, but he never got back the brain cells.

"You okay, Barry?" He shook his head. "What's the matter? Got a cold?"

He shook his head again. "No. It's Neil. I . . . I can't get over it. It isn't right."

"No."

"I'm, I'm gonna miss him. He was fun. And he helped me out. You know, like his deck? He was gonna hire me to fix it."

"I know."

"I was gonna do a good job. Neil said he knew that. He trusted me."

"I know."

"I told Neil I could screen it in for him. Make him a screened-in porch. So he could sleep outside, nights. He thought that was a great idea. Said it gave him all kinds of ideas."

"I'll bet," I said sourly.

"Yeah. He laughed a lot about that. I know you don't like him. But . . . he was fun. He looked out for me, he really did. And he listened to me. You know, I told Neil, I didn't think it was right. Him and Julie. He laughed about that too. He laughed a lot. I liked that. Most people don't laugh enough, you know?"

"I know. I haven't had a good laugh in a long time."

Barry ducked his head. "Who . . . who did it?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because. I've been worried. I thought maybe you got mad. I mean, I told Neil, I didn't think it was right. Him and Julie—"

"Barry, that was all a long time ago."

"But I told him. I did."

"I know. You said that."

"Did I?" I nodded. You have to be patient with Barry. "Well, I did. But I never thought you'd—"

"And I didn't."

"That's good. I didn't think you had. I just thought, you know . . ."

"I know."

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"If you find out, will you tell me? Please?"

"I will, Barry." I checked my watch. "You'd better get going or you'll be late for work."

He nodded again. "Just, let me know, okay?"

"Okay."

I went in and popped a beer. Jonasson and Barry, opposite ends of the pole, with the same damn idea. I didn't like it. I knew people would talk: "Well, you know Grant's never liked him. That whole thing with Julie Knoldt. And Barry just got out of the pen . . ." That's normal. But to have your boss—not that Jonasson's the chief, but close enough—and your brother asking if you'd killed someone was enough to make you check your clothes for bloodstains.

I hoped they were checking Julie out too. She and Neil had actually gotten married—and divorced a couple of years later. She left town after that. Nobody seemed to know where, although of course, they just might not want to tell me. There's a story around town about me and her, that I never got over her, mainly because I've never gotten married, like it's anybody's business but mine. Yeah, she broke my heart, but I did get over it. It's just that nobody believes it. And now it looked like another story was getting started . . .

I didn't sleep well that night. Or the next couple. I felt like everybody was watching me, waiting to see if I'd let anything out. Like a confession. Barry would drop by for coffee, look at me with his big dark eyes, and lope off. Jonasson kept glancing my way. People kept stopping to ask me how I was doing.

It was a real relief when Todd Johnson and Les Davison were finally arrested. How those two hooked up, I had no idea. Les was twenty years older than Todd and, as far as I'd ever seen, brutally heterosexual. But then I'd always thought Todd was just the standard Laskin juvenile delinquent. You can't ever tell. Anyway, they were caught in Mitchell selling a bunch of stuff from Neil's house. Between that and the videotapes, it was no trouble getting them transferred to Laskin to face murder charges.

"Well, that takes care of that," Chief Munson said.

And it might have been, except Todd's father, Lars, went and hired Jim Barnes to represent him.

"What the hell is he thinking?" Jonasson wondered. "Little drugged-out punk."

"Everybody deserves counsel," I commented. Jonassen made a face. "Who knows? Maybe he didn't do it." Jonasson stared at me. "Look, I know what's on the tapes, but Todd's never been violent. While Les—come on, he just got out of the pen for assault and battery."

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Jonasson thought a minute, his nose twitching. "If he did, he'd never confess."

"Who needs a confession?" I asked. "We've got evidence."

"Damn straight we have. It's just . . . You know how it is with a private attorney. They want to investigate. They're getting paid by the hour, why not? Things drag out. Things get dragged in." He glanced quickly at me and got up. "I'd better get back to work."

Barnes got cracking. He moved to get Todd transferred to a Sioux Falls facility—claimed we were overcrowded, and a bunch of legal mumbo-jumbo that could be summed up as it wasn't a good idea for the two defendants to be right next to each other every day. Which they weren't: They were a few cells apart. He tried to get Judge Dunn to recuse himself, on the grounds that having seen Todd on a regular basis for the last six years made him prejudiced. And he moved to suppress the videotapes.

That was the only popular thing Barnes did. Nobody wanted those videotapes shown in court, not even me. Though the amount of nervous anxiety about them interested me more than I would admit. I thought of the married woman I'd seen: I knew she must be sweating bullets. How many other people did he get on tape? And why in God's name would they do that? It showed that other side of Laskin that I tried not to think about. It made me sick when I realized that Barry probably knew all about it. Might even be on one . . .

Speaking of Barry, the night of Neil's funeral, Barry got drunk down at the Norseman's Bar. He wasn't causing any trouble—in fact, he was just sitting at the corner of the bar, crying his eyes out—but since he's on parole, he's not supposed to drink at all. Vi, the bartender, called me to come get him.

"Hi, Grant," Barry said. "Are you going to arrest me?"

"Nope. I'm taking you home, where you can sleep it off." I heaved him up. "Thanks, Vi."

"No problem. Poor guy."

I nodded and walked him outside. "But I thought . . ." he started to say, then stopped as I worked him into the front seat. "I don't feel so good," he added and passed out.

Jim McKinney pulled over in the patrol car. "He okay?" I shrugged. "Just get him on home," he said and winked at me.

I got him home and managed to heft him up and into the house and into bed. Then I went home, thanking God we live in a small town.

I went back over and reamed him up one side and down the other the next morning, and he promised me he'd behave. But

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two nights later, he was drunk and disorderly over at the Jackrabbit. They tried to calm him down—everybody likes Barry, besides feeling sorry for him—but he went ballistic on them and started heaving chairs around. One went through the new plate glass window, and this time Barry went to jail.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it but leave him until morning. I didn't get much sleep that night either. I went down around seven to see about getting him out on bond. The place was a madhouse. Everybody else was there, too, all talking, all running around.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Todd's confessed," Jean, the dispatcher, told me.

"What? When? How?"

"This morning," Jonasson said, coming through with a file folder tucked under his arm. "Guess he had a come-to-Jesus moment. Judge Dunn's going to be here at eight."

"He can't come any earlier?" Jean asked.

Jonasson snorted. "Don't be smart." He turned to me and said, "There's some paperwork, but after that's done you can take Barry home."

"And the charges?" I asked.

"What charges? He'll have to pay for the window, but as long as he agrees to do that, no charges will be filed."

I blinked. "That's great."

"Yeah. Remember me on your Christmas list next year."

"Have some coffee and donuts," Jean said.

I made myself comfortable, and we discussed world problems, new gossip, and how relieved Laskin would be that the whole Inveig thing was over. At eight A.M. they brought Todd out to take him to the courthouse, and as he passed I felt my stomach heave. Someone had beaten the crap out of him.

"Grant!" Jonasson called. "Your brother's ready."

I got up and walked back to the cells with Jonasson. On the way, I hissed, "That's never going to hold up."

"What are you talking about?"

"I just saw Todd. It's called coercion."

"What are you talking about? A fight with another prisoner?"

That sinking feeling in my stomach was getting worse. "Which one?" I asked.

Jonasson ignored me. "Barry, you ready?"

"I sure am," Barry said.

My heart was in my mouth as I looked him over. No bruises. His hands looked clean. I took a deep breath. "Barry." I took another breath and decided not to waste it. "Come on, let's go."

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"Yah, sure."

I took Barry home again and made us both a pot of coffee and some breakfast.

"Gee, this is good," Barry said, wolfing down the eggs and toast. "I mostly have cereal." When he was all done, he pulled out a cigarette. I saw him wince as he lit it. "That's good. That was real good."

"Glad you liked it."

"I'm glad you came and got me. I don't like being in jail. Don't like it at all."

"Yeah, well, you gotta stop the drinking, Barry—"

"Don't worry. I'm not gonna. I'm going to stay out of trouble from now on. Everything's going to be okay. Don't worry."

We were both quiet for a bit, and then I said quietly, "You want to tell me what happened?"

"Huh?"

"Barry, I've got to know what happened. You're on parole, anything could send you back, and there's going to be trouble—"

"There's not going to be any trouble." Barry was smiling, perfectly calm, perfectly happy. "You know Ken, down at work? He said what we need is a 'swift conviction and no jury.' " He was so proud of having remembered it exactly he repeated it three times. "So now there's not going to be any trial, and there's not going to be any trouble. It's all over."

"Is it?" I reached over and pulled back his sleeve.

"Hey!" he yelped, as I looked at the long bruise on his forearm. I let go of his arm and grabbed the other one. "What're you doing?" Same thing on that one.

"How did you get in Todd's cell?" I asked.

"What're you talking about?"

"The next one, then." Barry squirmed. "You grabbed him from your side and held him against the bars, that's where those bruises came from. And while you held him, someone made it plain that if Todd didn't confess, he was going to kill him. Or somebody would. And he beat him to a pulp to make it stick. And you joined in. It had to be Les. How'd he get in there?"

"I don't know," Barry said. I believed that. Barry wouldn't know. He wouldn't have wanted to know, so he wouldn't know, even if he'd seen somebody let Les in, or hand Les a key, or . . . I put my head in my hands and groaned. "What's wrong, Grant?"

"You know what's wrong."

"Don't do that!" Barry wailed as I started shaking. "It's all right, Grant."

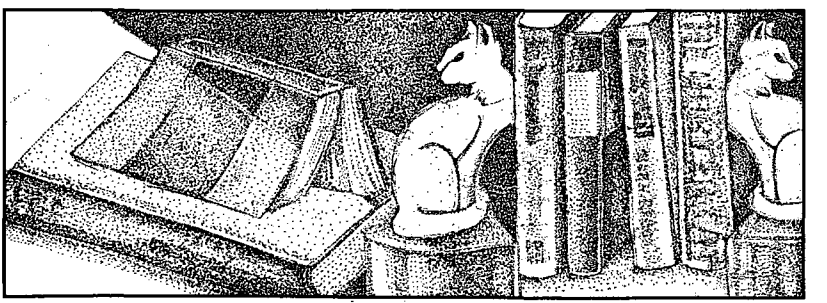
"No, it's not. You don't know . . ." I couldn't believe it, but I was crying.

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"Grant." Barry put his hand on my shoulder, and then, as I couldn't quit crying, he put his arms around me awkwardly. "It's gonna be okay, Grant. It's okay. Everything's taken care of."

And it was. Jim Barnes tried to raise some stink, but it didn't take. Todd made his confession in front of Judge Dunn, was convicted, and went to the pen for manslaughter. Les went to the pen as well, for stolen goods. Everybody was happy. Nothing came out. Nothing ever will.

You know, that whole thing about first love is right: It's just the person that's wrong. Your first love's your family. Who you protect, who you help, who you never, ever betray. Even when you've betrayed everything else, including yourself. And all you can do is hope, with all your heart, that a small town really is just like heaven.



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CLIFF'S FOLLY

DOUGLAS GRANT JOHNSON

Cliff's Folly, some were calling it.

It wouldn't surprise me if there were others who would go as far as to call it plain crazy. Whenever I happen to mention it, my wife, Lillie, expresses her opinion about it by simply smiling and shaking her head slightly.

One afternoon, about a week after I parked it in one corner of my place of business, the Cliff Mills Garage, I began to think maybe everyone was right. It had been a long day with no customers, and I had spent most of it doing little more than sitting there looking at it and adding up all the hours I would have to spend to finish it.

What *it* was, was a 1925 Dodge four-door sedan. It was only a few years old, but it looked like it had been run over by a horde of Roman war chariots, including the horses. I had bought it in this condition for about what a junkyard would have offered.

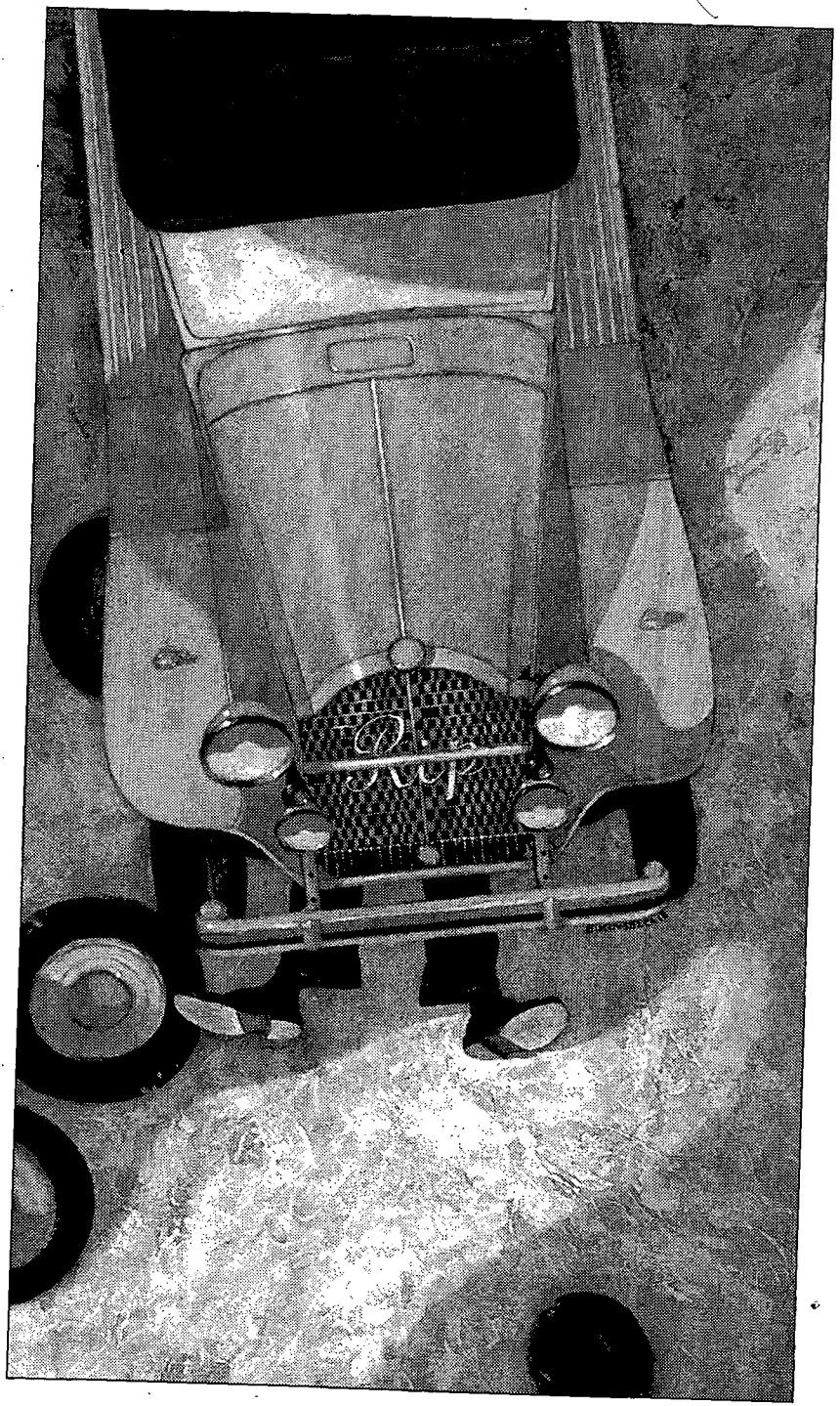
The idea for it hatched itself some time ago. I had been browsing around the new car showroom at the Ford dealer over at the county seat, admiring a truck I had no hope of ever buying. A few days later I announced to Lillie that if I couldn't afford one, I would make one. And I knew of a car that was priced just right to provide the raw materials. Plus, I said, I often had a lot of down time in the shop and I might as well turn that time into something useful. The idea would be to cut out most of the back half, bring the rear panel of the car forward, and make a pickup truck out of it.

And that, it now seemed, would be the easy part. I would also have to remove an uncountable number of dents, wrinkles, gouges, dings, and scratches. Not to mention a whole lot of rust. Oh yes, and I'd also have to fabricate some sort of bed, probably out of wood, to complete the project and make it into a proper pickup truck.

The fact that the engine still purred like a kitten was the reason I'd become interested in it. But now that just didn't seem to be enough incentive to save it in any form, sedan or pickup.

I don't mind telling you I was beginning to feel a sharp dose of reality coming on. Sort of like the fellow in the movies who looks

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Edward Kinsella III

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over his shoulder and notices a fast-moving locomotive about fifty yards away and realizes he's parked squarely on the tracks.

Late in the afternoon, my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car pulling up in front of the shop. I looked around to see a man get out of a big Packard and walk toward me through the big open doorway. Dust smears on the crown of his homburg and on the sleeves of his coat looked very much out of place. And he didn't look happy.

"I had a flat tire on the way over here. I need you to fix it," he said.

"I can handle that." I wasn't sure he heard me, or even cared whether he did because he had already turned back to his car, clearly expecting me to follow.

I did, even though I didn't like his manner. Normally I don't spend much time fixing flat tires. Most people around here fix their own. But he was the first chance I'd had all day to make a buck. Actually, four bits was the going rate. But four bits was four bits these days.

He opened the rear door of his car and gestured toward the tire sitting there, expecting me to roll it out. He hadn't bothered to put it back on the front fender where the spares usually rode on this car.

"I've got an errand that'll take me only a few minutes. Have it ready when I come back."

"Do my best," I said without too much conviction.

"I'll want you to mount it on the car too. I put a big scratch on the fender just changing it, and I don't want any more of that to happen."

My eye went to a jagged scratch about three inches long on his highly polished black rear fender.

I guess he didn't expect any response from me because when I looked back at him he was already climbing into his car.

I watched him drive away, wondering who he was. It was a rich man's car. And he dressed rich. No one in this town wore a hat like that. You only saw them in newsreels on the heads of diplomats or Wall Street tycoons. It was easy to picture him as an evil banker whose errand was to throw some poor family into the street. A lot of people everywhere were having trouble paying off loans and mortgages.

It was a couple of years after the crash of '29, and the effects of that were getting worse rather than better. The depression that followed was what had brought me and my little family here to the small town of Watsonville. We were refugees from unemploy-

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ment and all the other ills of the Depression up in the state capital. When our money and other resources ran out and we were faced with life in the local Hooverville growing in one of the parks, Lillie's family offered us the vacant home of her grandfather. We could live in it rent free if we could keep the taxes paid. While that lifted a big load of discouragement, it did little to put food on the table. But we took the offer anyway, and when we arrived here, I discovered there was no auto repair shop in the town. That was what I'd been doing at the Cadillac dealer up at the capital before they'd let me go, so I decided to employ myself. I rented, for next to nothing, what used to be an old blacksmith shop that had stood vacant for years and opened the doors. We'd done okay since then. At least we'd been able to keep our heads above water.

I took the tire into the shop and got right to work. Its owner seemed like the type who meant a few minutes when he said a few minutes. Not more than twenty minutes later—something of a record for me—a rusty nail was gone and the tire was ready.

I rolled it over to the front of the shop where it would be handy and paused to look up and down the street. My customer and his car were nowhere in sight. With nothing else to do, I relaxed against the doorframe and watched the late afternoon traffic pass by. Main Street in our little town is also the main highway, and sometimes all sorts of interesting vehicles pass through.

A moment later, a tow truck passed, hauling a big Cadillac Brougham. It was a nice-looking car, and I wondered what was wrong and where the fellows in the truck were taking it. The name on the door of the cab identified it as a towing service from Spring City, the next town west of here. I'd heard of the company, although I'd never had any occasion to call them. They must have more than one tow truck, I thought, because this one was older and pretty beat up. A short time ago I had seen a different one with the same name on it, a big one that looked fairly new. It had been pulling a big freight truck back onto the highway where it had tipped over following an accident.

It would have been nice if the Cadillac were being taken to my shop, I thought. Under the hood, I was familiar with that car and certainly could have used the work.

A half hour later, long past my regular closing time, I was still watching the traffic go by. By then, I guess I was also feeling a little perverse. When he came back, I wanted this arrogant gent to think he had kept me waiting. But I'd waited long enough.

As I pulled my big front door closed, I paused to take one last look at the tire. You could see it was almost new because the mold

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marks weren't completely worn off. I remembered the well-worn spare tire he'd put on in its place. It had seemed a little out of place—a poor man's spare on a rich man's car. On the other hand, I'd often heard it said you got rich and stayed rich by pinching pennies.

But the really troubling thing was, the fellow hadn't seemed like the type who would just go off and forget about his new tire, especially if he had any distance to go.

"You're late today," Lillie said as I came home that evening. It was an observation, not an accusation. "Busy day?"

"I fixed a flat tire."

"That's all? That didn't take you all day."

"It was the only business that came in. And then the fellow who left it didn't come back to pick it up. I even waited for him after I should've closed. That's why I'm late."

"Maybe he'll pick it up tomorrow."

She began to move food from the warming oven of the stove to the kitchen table. I sat and watched her for a moment before I spoke.

"I've decided to get one of the junkyards over by the county seat to come and pick up the Dodge," I said.

"Really?" she said with a little laugh.

I expected her to have more to say, like, "What a good idea that was," but she continued silently setting up the table.

I shrugged. "If a customer brought in a car in that condition, I'd probably tell him it would be cheaper to buy a new one."

"I thought the whole idea was to put some of your idle hours into something that might be useful."

"I guess that was the idea."

"And what's happened that it isn't a good idea anymore?"

"Billy may be old enough to drive by the time it's finished."

She gave a little laugh. "Billy's only three and a half."

"Almost four. But that's my point."

"If you have many days like today, it seems to me time wouldn't be a problem."

"I, um, thought you weren't so high on the idea."

"Well, I did think it was kind of silly."

"Everybody who has stopped by the shop probably thinks I'm a little off upstairs. And the ones who haven't seen it have probably heard about it."

She paused while she looked me in the eye. " 'Silly' is not the same as 'a little off upstairs.' And I don't think you're a 'little off upstairs,' " she said. After a pause, thinking over what she had just

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said, she smiled and added, "Well, not normally, anyway. So what exactly did you do with all your time when you weren't fixing a customer's flat?"

"Pretty much sat and stared at the Dodge."

"All day?"

"I swept the floor once."

"Nothing else?"

"I straightened up the tool racks."

She stopped what she was doing. Perhaps, I thought, she was considering whether I had gone over the edge after all.

"And you didn't start doing anything on your pickup project?"

"Hard to know where to start."

She put another serving dish on the table and stood quietly beside me for a long moment.

"I think," she finally said, "you shouldn't give up on it."

"What?" I wanted to rattle my ears to see if I had heard right.

She made another round trip to the stove without a word. Then she paused to say, "If you give up, people might think you're a quitter. That's worse than being a 'little off upstairs.'"

"It could take years."

"Really, Cliff, if you quit, aren't you afraid people will still call it 'Cliff's Folly'? Especially after it's gone?"

I hadn't thought about that, and it took me a moment to digest it. "Maybe they'll think I've come to my senses and give me a pat on the back."

"More likely, what they'll remember is, when a tough job came along, you gave up."

She was right, as she usually is. It was going to be "Cliff's Folly" either way. I must have looked pretty glum because she smiled and put her hand on mine.

"Go call Billy so we can eat. He's in the backyard. Supper's already getting cold."

For the next couple of days I was busy doing one thing or another for several customers. Invariably, each looked askance at the old sedan, and offered the polite opinion that I was in for a lot of work. I could almost feel the words "Cliff's Folly" forming in their minds.

See, the problem with a project as big as this . . . well, when the big door of my shop was open, as it usually is in good weather, you could even see it driving by. It's so big, people can't help but notice it. And talk about it.

I was feeling so gloomy about it, I think if I'd had a free moment, I might have borrowed someone's telephone and made the call, despite Lillie's advice.

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From time to time I glanced at the tire leaning against the wall, wondering why its owner hadn't shown up to claim it.

It was troubling in the same way as a problem with a car. Like when you've removed all the reasons an engine doesn't run and it still doesn't run. When that happens it's because you've misdiagnosed something. With the tire, I didn't have enough information to make any kind of diagnosis, and that was frustrating.

When I reported in each evening, Lillie's raised eyebrows asked the obvious question.

"No, I didn't call a junkyard."

"Good," she'd say and give me a kiss on the cheek before continuing what she was doing.

With that one word her arguments were brought quickly and clearly into focus and I heard them as forcefully as if she had spoken them again. She was still right. The old car would be "Cliff's Folly" forever if I gave up.

About then I finally figured out what my dose of reality had been trying to tell me about it. I knew a body man where I used to work who had many years of experience. He often said good body work was like sculpting. Well, what I knew about sculpting was less than what I knew about the back side of the moon. Compared to him, I was an amateur and my a project needed his experience.

And this amateur had been looking for an easy way out. What I needed, I suppose, was a good swift kick to get me started.

In the early afternoon the next day, Mr. Samuelson came by. He operated one of the two grocery stores in town and was also the owner of the old blacksmith shop I was renting for my auto repair business. He asked me to step out and have a look at his car, a two-year-old Plymouth sedan with a badly dented fender and a crushed running board.

"My wife had a little difficulty avoiding a fence post while she was visiting her folks a couple of days ago," he said, running his hand over the wrinkled areas of the fender and smiling ruefully.

"Sure. I can handle that," I said quickly.

It was my usual response when a customer brought a car into my shop. But, alas, I wasn't thinking. What I should have said, if I had been thinking, was, "Not my line of work." What he had asked me to do, and what I had agreed to do, was body work!

I didn't think I could diplomatically take it back, so I just gulped and realized the good swift kick I needed had just been administered by none other than myself.

"Actually, what happened was that another car ran her off the

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road," he added, not noticing what must have been a look of dismay on my face. "Weaving all over the road, she said it was."

"I, uh, I guess I'll need to look it over and see, um, what needs to be done."

"Fine. I'll leave the car with you for a while this afternoon. I'll pick it up later and you can tell me what it's going to cost."

When I told Lillie about the prospect of working on Mr. Samuelson's damaged car and expressed my opinion of my fender unbending skills, she said, "Well, you've got a fender or two of your own to practice on, haven't you?"

What could I possibly say to that logic?

The next morning the abandoned tire and the Dodge were right where I had left them. I took a moment to look over both of them as I began to plan my day. I was not encouraged by either one.

When Mr. Samuelson returned to pick up his car the afternoon before, I told him I thought the big dent in his fender could be straightened, but that because the running board was of heavier metal, it would be easier and cheaper to find a replacement at a junkyard. He thought the price I quoted for the job was fair. I told him I'd start looking for a replacement for his running board right away.

Since moving to Watsonville and opening my shop, I hadn't had occasion to poke around any of the local junkyards. Most of the repair work I'd been doing was the kind where you're better off putting in new parts. But I knew about two of them because I'd passed them whenever I went over to the county seat. One of them was where I'd been thinking of sending my Dodge.

Before locking up, my gaze settled on the fenders of that battered Dodge. As Lillie had pointed out, if I could learn to straighten one of its fenders, I might do okay with Mr. Samuelson's Plymouth after all.

I took a deep breath and decided I would spare an hour or so to make at least a token effort to get started on the Dodge. If I did that, perhaps the urge to get rid of it would go away. I grabbed a couple of wrenches and started to remove one of its fenders. Compared to everything that needed to be done, it was no more than a symbolic gesture. But at least I could tell Lillie I had started. An hour later, with the help of a blowtorch to loosen the rusty bolts, the left front fender was off.

I was getting ready to leave for the junkyards, when my friend Dave dropped by.

Dave is the town marshal, although to look at him you might not guess. He doesn't wear a uniform. What he wears is a pair of

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striped bib overalls because that's what he wears to work his large farm on the outskirts of town. He can do both because there isn't much for a law officer to do in Watsonville, and what little there is, he can usually take care of by the strength of his logic and the force of his personality. He doesn't wear a badge either. I suppose he has one, but if he does, he probably doesn't think it gives him any more authority than he already has.

"I've been wondering when you were going to get started," he said, smiling and nodding toward the Dodge's fender lying on the floor.

I sat on a stool next to him and looked at the car.

"It looks even worse without a fender," I said. "You've heard some're calling it 'Cliff's Folly'?"

"I wouldn't fret about it. Talk like that will go away when it's done."

It was almost the same thing Lillie was trying to tell me. It's the kind of thing that's nice to hear when at heart you're not so sure of yourself. I don't mind telling you it feels good to have friends like Dave. Neither of us said anything for a moment, then Dave shook his head, seeming to remember why he stopped by.

"You hear about the Grower's Bank being closed up this morning?" he asked.

It wasn't the first bank to close I'd heard about. The papers were saying it was starting to happen all over the country. I looked up with a sigh of relief.

"I've got no money in it."

"That's good. There's state people all over it this morning. Murdock, the owner, he's gone missing without a word to anyone. There's rumors he's absconded with the remainin' assets of the bank."

"I don't know him."

"A lot of people do. He's holdin' more'n a hatful of paper on property around the county, and I understand he's been personally spreadin' foreclosure notices around the last few weeks."

"I've got a small foreclosure notice of my own I'd like to deliver, if I knew who to deliver it to." I pointed to the tire sitting near my front door, and Dave followed my gesture. "A couple of days ago, a fellow came by in a real hurry, left me this tire to fix." I described the man's visit to my shop and how I'd had a futile wait for him to come in and pick it up.

"Nice-looking tire. Looks almost new," Dave said.

"So was his car. A big Packard, last year's model. The fellow looked pretty well off too. Wore a black homberg, and I'll bet the suit he wore cost a bundle."

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"Describe him."

"Why? Are you going to try to track him down for me?" I chuckled at the prospect of Dave going after him.

"Only feller in the county I ever saw wear a homburg is that banker they say has run off. Did he have a mustache?"

"Yeah, kinda' thin, like some of the movie stars are wearing. Sort of like Douglas Fairbanks, as a matter of fact."

"I think it's likely that was Murdock you saw. What was he over here for?"

"He said he had an errand that would only take a short while and told me to hurry with his tire."

"He say who he was going to see?"

"I didn't think it was any of my business, so I didn't ask. From what he said, I thought I'd barely have time to fix his tire."

"Be interesting to know who it was he was visiting," Dave said, more to himself than to me. "And what for."

I shrugged as Dave went on, "If it was him, and he was going to abscond, seems to me it would have been after he came and picked up his tire."

I chuckled. "That spare sure wasn't in great shape. Riding on it doesn't sound like what you'd do if you were planning a trip to anywhere very far away." I said.

"I wonder if the sheriff knows he mighta been over here? I ought to stop by city hall and use the telephone."

He stood with a smile, touched me on the shoulder, and took a last look at the derelict that was supposed to be my future pick-up. "Good luck," he said and waved a good-bye.

The junkyard I went to first was about four acres of cars and trucks, parked for the last time in various conditions ranging, as you might expect, between mayhem and decay. Mostly, you have to think of a place like this as a mine, a place to find—for a lot less than what a new part would cost—an occasional fender, axle, door, radiator, windshield, or some other part with some life left in it. On that basis, these establishments served their public well. The only problem was, they were never very well organized.

"Best I can tell you is have a look through the lot," the owner, or manager, or whatever he was, drawled as he scratched a week-old beard and tried to wake up. I had found him fast asleep, slumped over a battered old wooden desk. "You find your running board, show me and we'll talk price."

It wasn't helpful, but I guessed it was the best he could do for me. For the next hour, I wandered up and down the narrow aisles, looking at every car. This has the possibility of becoming very

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dreary unless you keep in mind the "mine" concept.

After searching the entire place, I returned to the manager's shack and reported my lack of success.

"Come to think of it," he said, scratching his beard again, "don't recall seein' a Plymouth o' that year ever come in."

I wished he had done his thinking an hour ago. Then I thought he actually deserved my sympathy. He was a sad-faced old guy who obviously hadn't caught on to the "mine" concept.

The second junkyard was a smaller one, and I didn't get much help with the cars I could expect to find there either. I ended up walking all the way through it without finding the running board I was looking for. But at one point I found myself staring at the twin of the old Dodge sedan back in my shop. Its rear end had been crushed in some accident, which was the reason it was here. But the front fenders and hood, about the only usable parts left, were in pristine condition. And, surprisingly, neither had much rust.

These fenders would save hours and hours on my project, but the manager quoted a price I thought was a little high. It didn't matter because it would be a while before I had any extra money to lavish on fenders, no matter the price.

I turned to leave, thinking I might have to try straightening that running board after all, or explain to Mr. Samuelson that we'd have to get a more expensive new one from the dealer. But as I was halfway out the door, the manager called out, "Might try Cluff's, over in Spring City."

I recognized the name. It was on the tow truck I'd seen pulling the Cadillac a few days before.

"You sure? The tow service?"

"Oh, that's just kind of a sideline. They got a big lot over there. Might have what you need."

Spring City was about twenty miles on the other side of Watsonville. Being fairly new to the area, I wasn't familiar with many of the surrounding towns. I'd never had any reason to travel over there because the county seat was much closer and much larger, and they had everything we couldn't get locally. But it was worth a try.

On the outskirts of Spring City, a large sign—which simply said "Cluff's"—let me know I had found it. It was a large establishment, spreading over many acres. Several buildings were in front. On one side, butting up against the small office, was a long shop building with several large doors facing the street. In back of it I could see the top part of a big derrick or crane. On the other side of the office was a shed open to the street. Under it were a couple of cars, an older Franklin and a Chevrolet, parked head out with "For Sale" signs hanging on them. Next to them was the older

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truck I'd seen towing the Cadillac, and next to that, a Buick sedan without a sign on it. Although there was space for it, the big tow truck wasn't there. Probably out on a job, I guessed.

Inside, the fellow behind the counter looked me over for a moment, and while he did, I had a half second's feeling I had seen him before. But the feeling disappeared as he spoke.

"Something I can do for y'?"

He was tall enough he could look down at me, and my impression of him was his morning would have been just as complete if I hadn't shown up. However, unlike the two at the other yards, this fellow looked awake and busy. He didn't introduce himself, but from his demeanor, I had no trouble assuming his name was the one on the sign outside. I stepped up and described the running board I was looking for.

"We took in a Plymouth o' that year," he said. "Three rows down and then somewhere on your right." He jerked his thumb in the general direction of the yard. "It was a coupe, I think. But fenders and all that . . . they're the same as a four-door."

Maybe he was trying to be helpful after all, but it was offered in a tone of voice that suggested he thought I was some sort of imbecile. I merely shrugged my thanks and went on.

As in the other yards I had visited, there had originally been some attempt to leave orderly aisles for access between double rows of cars. But I guess they were running out of space because here and there cars had been dropped in the aisles, blocking the way. This meant sometimes going the long way around to get where you were going or climbing over the tightly packed wrecks. In some places these were stacked two cars high, especially near the front of the lot.

After trudging around a few of these detours I finally found the Plymouth. Both front fenders were already missing, so the temptation to settle for an undamaged fender died right there.

But the running board I needed was present. A simple measurement confirmed that it was indeed interchangeable.

Heading back to the office, I had a moment's feeling I was walking in some sort of gigantic maze. It wasn't that I could become completely lost because over the cars I could see the roof of the office and the large home-built derrick structure I had noticed before.

With those references, I worked my way back to the front of the lot, taking note of a car here and there, especially for one that might supply a few parts for my pickup project. Especially body parts I wouldn't have to pound dents out of. But this place had nothing that would help with my Dodge.

Still, I found myself lingering in a few places, observing the kind

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of things others had found and taken away from the derelicts stacked around me. This yard was truly a mine.

A few moments later, another dead end left me standing in a relatively open area next to the rear entrance of the shop building. An old Mack truck was parked there, and on it was the derrick I'd seen. Probably what they used for dragging the wrecks around and stacking them up, I thought.

I was about to retrace my steps to find another way to the office when I noticed the rear door to the shop was ajar. Glancing through it, I could see another door at the far end that looked like it led to the office. I pushed on, glad I wouldn't have to take the long way around.

Inside the shop, various car parts, large and small, were hanging from walls and rafters and stacked in the corners. A couple of cars, up on blocks, were in various stages of assembly or disassembly.

I glanced at the cars as I passed. It was easy to see what was happening. The cars were being rebuilt. It was likely the cars for sale in front had come from this shop.

When I was working up in the capital before coming here, I had known of a couple of shops that would take several identical wrecks and, by taking the undamaged parts, rebuild them into one serviceable car. There was certainly nothing wrong with that, and it did provide employment.

Between the rebuilds was a late model car covered with a tarpaulin. Obviously one that had been finished, I thought. I stopped to admire what I could see of it.

"What y' think yer doin' in here, bud?"

I whirled at the challenge. A large grease-stained fellow slid out from under the next car. When he stood, he still had a wrench in his hand.

"Sorry," I said. "I was just trying to get back to the office and this looked like the shortest way from where I ended up."

"This ain't no public boo-le-vard," he said, parodying the last word. With his wrench he pointed to the door leading to the office and would have taken me by the arm to lead me if I hadn't started moving in that direction. He followed me.

"Nice work on the car there." I pointed over my shoulder in the direction of the car under the tarp.

"Lotta hours on that'n," he said. He followed me all the way into the office.

As we stepped into the office, he said, "Fella here, seems he got lost findin' his way back here, Mr. Cluff."

Cluff didn't respond to that. To me, he said abruptly, "That runnin' board do y'?"

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"Just fine."

After a slight hesitation, he quoted a price that seemed reasonable.

"Sounds okay." I was not getting a warm feeling from the mechanic or Mr. Cluff, and I hoped our business could be concluded as soon as possible.

"Rusty here'll go with y'. Make sure you don't get lost again." He glanced at the mechanic and motioned with a tilt of his head toward the lot.

I had brought my own bag of tools, as it was usually the practice that the buyer did the work of removal. Rusty actually pitched in to help, although he hardly said a word the whole time. I had the distinct feeling he did it mostly to make my visit to the establishment as brief as possible. Frankly, I was getting a little nervous myself the longer I was in that place.

I paid for my purchase and quickly left. By the time I had the running board tied onto my car, the hairs were standing up on the back of my neck, and I felt like I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

It was mostly because of that car under the tarp. It was big and it was black, and I didn't think that mechanic had spent any time at all fixing it up. The tarp had not been large enough to cover it completely. The trunk and part of the rear fenders were exposed. On the right rear fender was the same paint scratch I had seen a couple of days before when the banker had dropped off that flat tire for me to fix.

Dave was riding his tractor when I found him. When he noticed me stumbling across his newly plowed field, he smiled and waved. A moment later he stopped and waited for me to approach.

"I just saw that missing banker's car," I said.

The smile disappeared quickly. He raised his plows, shut down the engine, and jumped down. I told him where I had seen it and how I had come to discover it.

"You're sure it was the same car?"

"It was a Packard. I can't see there's any chance of a scratch like that showing up on another car. And there was the same worn tire under it. It's the same one all right."

"If you saw it, you saw it," he said. "I think the sheriff ought to hear about this."

He motioned for me to follow and started walking back to his house. We were almost there when he turned to me.

"When I told him about the banker not coming back to pick up his tire, the sheriff just said he must have been in a terrible hurry to leave." He paused for a moment. "So far the examiners haven't

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found any evidence of money suddenly bein' missin', but they're still lookin'."

While he was using the telephone to call the sheriff, I waited in the yard, passing the time of day with his wife, who was hanging wash on the line to dry. When Dave returned from the telephone a few moments later, he said, "The sheriff'll be sendin' a deputy over this afternoon. He'll want to hear from you about the car you saw. I told him it would prob'ly save time if his man stopped by to talk to you in your shop." A moment later he added, "Interesting place for that banker's car to turn up."

I thought so, too, but I didn't try to make any kind of speculation. My attention right then was on the fluttering still going on in my stomach.

Lillie was just clearing the supper dishes that evening when Dave pulled up in front of our house. I had told her about my adventures of the day, as I usually do. We both waited with a little apprehension as Dave climbed out of his truck and came up the path to the house. I was waiting for him at the front door, and when he saw me he just perceptibly moved his head from side to side.

"Deputy Harker came by my place a bit ago," Dave said once we were inside. He was the deputy who had stopped by my shop to hear my account of the Packard. "He paid a visit to your junkyard. He said the only thing he saw in that shop building was a couple of wrecks they're tryin' to rebuild and a Buick that was covered by a tarp. Cluff said it was his personal car, an' was in there waitin' for some new gears to come in for the rear end."

"Did he ask them about the Packard?"

"He said he didn't let on what he was lookin' for. Told 'em he just came to have a look around."

"They moved it!" Lillie said.

"The sheriff probably thinks I sent his man on a wild-goose chase," I said.

Dave didn't answer right away, and I could see I was right.

"Harker said the Buick was a real dark blue, could'a looked black in the dim light. I reminded him you'd been helpful to the sheriff a couple times," Dave said. "Told him you were a reliable man and wouldn't make a mistake about what you saw."

"There was no mistake."

"He said he looked around the lot some too. Cluff was a bit put out because there's nothing illegal about building automobiles out of parts of others."

"So it's gone, then. Do the people over there know I was the one responsible for the officer having a look around?"

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"I asked Harker about that. Says he didn't mention you. But if you made as much of a splash over there as you said, that's probably why they moved it."

"Harker think of that?"

Dave hesitated. "He doesn't think a scratch and a worn tire are much to go on. Tires on that Buick weren't in great shape, he said."

"I don't think it's a place you ought to be visiting again soon," Lillie said.

"I guess they might be a bit wary of you." Dave glanced at Lillie and waited for her nod of agreement before he continued. "Anyway, the sheriff thinks he's got the answer to it all. Harker said they're looking at Willy Barnes real close."

"Barnes? Why?"

Barnes lived on the other side of town. I knew who he was, but we weren't acquainted. In a town as small as Watsonville, it doesn't take long to know who most people are, even if you don't know them well.

"I guess the sheriff's thinkin' foul play. The examiners came across his name on some copies of a foreclosure notice."

"Then he could have been the one the banker said he was going to see."

"It was Barnes, all right. But Barnes himself isn't around. His wife said he went up to the capital looking into some work a relative told him about. The day she said he left was the same day the banker left that tire at your shop. But she insists Murdock was there in the late afternoon and her husband had gone out to the highway early in the morning to hitch a ride up to the capital."

"He was gone before Murdock came over here, then."

"Or so she says," Dave said, shaking his head sadly.

"They've got the police up there looking for him. What I heard, they haven't found him yet."

"So how did the Packard end up at the junkyard?" Lillie said.

Dave shrugged. I didn't have an answer either.

Mrs. Samuelson was a little embarrassed when she delivered their car to me the next morning.

"I don't think it was really my fault," she said. "They were weaving all over the road. It was like they didn't care about anyone else. If I hadn't gone off the road they might have hit me head on. And they didn't even stop!"

"Too bad you didn't get their license number," I said.

"Oh, I'll remember the car if I see it again. Big Packard sedan, no mistaking that radiator grille! There's not too many of them around."

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That sort of got my attention. Her husband had said her accident happened on what would have been the same afternoon the banker had disappeared.

"You said 'they'?"

"There were two. In the front seat. Arguing. Not paying a bit of attention to the road. In fact, I thought they were coming to blows."

"Well, I'm glad you're okay."

I stood thinking about the Packard as she turned to go. Almost certainly it was the banker's Packard she had seen. But Murdock had been alone when he had stopped to leave his flat tire with me. Was Barnes the extra person in his car?

I called after Mrs. Samuelson, who had gone only a few steps toward their store.

"Where was it this happened?"

She looked back at me. "About five miles out of town. My folks have a farm over near Spring City. I was on my way back from there when it happened."

I nodded and she continued on her way. Her accident had happened on the highway to Spring City. If you stayed on it, that same highway eventually connected to others that went to the capital, but it was a longer way to get there. The shortest way went through the county seat. Perhaps the passenger could have been Mr. Barnes hitching his ride. But still, why would Barnes go out that way to hitch a ride? And what connection might he have with the junkyard?

As interesting as that thought was, I was also trying to remember something else I had noticed about one of the other junker cars I had seen at Cluff's. I had been looking around after finding the running board, hoping to come across any parts for my pick-up project. At the time, it was just something a little odd, a little out of place. I hadn't spent a lot of time looking at it, and I had intended to look at the car again when I went back to remove the running board. But with my head spinning after discovering the Packard and with the yard's mechanic looking over my shoulder, I had not thought of it again until now. I spent a long few moments trying to remember exactly what it was. And what it meant.

"Actually, I didn't think much of it when I first noticed it," I said.

It was the end of the evening. All the chores had been done and Billy had, after three tries, been successfully put to bed. I was sitting on a sofa in our living room with Lillie.

"What was it you saw?"

"One of the wrecks had been moved. And recently. And for no

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reason that I can think of. The frame was sitting right on the ground. When a car's been sitting out there for a while, grass and weeds kind of take over. But they don't grow under the parts of the car that are sitting on the ground. From what I saw, the car had been moved. There was a bare strip along the side."

"Don't they do that sometimes? To get parts off?"

"Sure. But anything underneath that car was gone a long time ago. Axles, wheels, running gear were gone, and grass was growing where they would have been."

"Then why move it?"

"I can't think of any reason."

"Is it important?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

Nevertheless, I sat for a long time trying to think of a reason. Finally I said, "I ought to go over and have another look at it, make sure I saw what I think I saw."

"This is not any of your business, Cliff Mills. From what Dave said, you might not be very welcome over there."

"I can't tell the sheriff about it. He thinks I'm seeing things."

"Dave didn't say that."

"After his deputy went over there on a wild goose chase, what else is he going to think?"

I didn't go back over to Cluff's the next day. I sort of put it out of my mind as I looked over the long crease in the fender of Mr. Samuelson's car. Yesterday I had taken off the damaged running board and sanded a few rust spots on the replacement I'd gotten from the junkyard. I knew that was going to be the easy part, so naturally, I had done that first. Now all that was left was the hard part, the fender. My work habits seemed to be going downhill on this job.

I didn't have all the assorted hammers and hand anvils a good body shop would have, but the old blacksmith's tools and equipment were still there in one end of the shop. I sorted through them and came up with an amazing assortment of hammers and other things I thought might actually be quite useful.

Still, it was going to take a little more courage than I had to go directly to the fender of Mr. Samuelson's Plymouth. I took Lillie's advice and started to practice my fender unbending skills on a fender that didn't matter as much in the larger scheme of things. I picked up the one I'd taken off the old Dodge and began to attack one of its major creases. One thing I had learned from that body man I'd watched is that if you begin with the point of first impact and work that back to its original place, the minor wrinkles will try to follow.

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It was logical, but finding that spot on this one was easier said than done. The metal was moving slightly, but at the present rate this dent was going to take the rest of the morning. Nevertheless, it was working, and as I worked, I thought about how the same logic might be applied to the problem of the tire and the missing banker. The only problem was, I couldn't put my finger on the point of first impact of that problem either.

I was standing there scratching my head when a car pulled up in front. It was Mrs. Constantine, and the front of her car was enveloped in steam.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Mr. Mills," she said. "But when she started to blow, I thought I'd better not wait to get home before I filled it up again. And I thought you could see if it was leaking somewhere."

"You had the right idea," I said.

Mrs. Constantine is an elderly widow who lives just through the block from us. She's been a good neighbor and friend to my wife and me. While we waited for her radiator to dry off and cool, she told me about her morning.

"I've been over to the county seat to take my money out of the bank."

"The Grower's Bank is open again?"

"No, not that one. The State Bank. They say it's going to be all right, but with what's been happening to banks all over, a person can't be too careful!"

"I guess that's true."

"My son Fred, who lives over there, he had a little money in Grower's. The authorities won't say when it'll be open for business. It's in the paper, the owner is still missing."

I told her about fixing a tire for a man we thought might be the missing banker and about his not returning to pick it up. I didn't say anything about the junkyard where I'd seen his car, though.

"I saw a car like that a few days ago," she said. "I was down at the gas station. Not often you see a car like that in this town. They were driving away just as I was pulling in."

"They?"

"There were two men in the front seat."

There it was, the banker's car again, and I wondered again who the second person was. Somehow, I had trouble with the theory of a hitchhiker. Even from my brief acquaintance with the banker, he didn't seem like the type of person who would bother giving a ride to a hitchhiker. But maybe I had him pegged wrong.

"The radiator has stopped steaming," Mrs. Constantine said.

I put my hand on the radiator cap and judged it was indeed cool

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enough to remove. I grabbed a hose and refilled it. While I was at it, I carefully checked it and the hoses.

"I don't find anywhere it could be leaking," I said.

"I know radiators eventually get clogged up," she said. "I probably need a new one." There was disappointment and resignation in her voice.

"I've heard of a fellow over in the county seat that rebuilds them, cleans them out, and it's a lot cheaper than a new one. But if you don't do more than drive around town, it should be all right for a while."

She offered to pay for my trouble in filling and checking. I refused and said it was no trouble at all, but I knew she'd be calling with a big pie or cake or a plate of cookies in the next few days.

Just before climbing into her car, she paused to glance from the old Dodge to the fender I had been working on.

"I heard you banging away on that fender when I drove up. My husband used to have a little forge. He would fix things with it and sometimes I'd have to help him. Why don't you fire up that big one over there in the corner and heat that fender up before you start banging away?"

I turned to stare warily at the forge. I knew less about operating a forge than I did about snake charming. And even less, it seemed, than Mrs. Constantine.

I wondered if the body man I knew would have approved of the idea. But I had seen him occasionally heat a damaged area with a special acetylene torch. I didn't have one of those, so maybe the forge might be worth trying.

As I watched my neighbor drive away, I noticed Dave's truck parked in front of the city offices down the street. I walked over to look him up.

I found him as he was coming out and walking to his truck.

"They found Mr. Barnes up at the capital," Dave said right away. "They haven't arrested him, but they're sure thinkin' the two of them could have had a run-in over that foreclosure notice."

I told him about the two people Mrs. Constantine and Mrs. Samuelson had seen in the Packard.

"Interestin'," Dave said. "The sheriff might think it would support his idea Barnes was involved."

"And how did his car get to that junkyard?"

Dave paused for a long moment. "They're still thinkin' you maybe made a mistake."

I paused, too, but not for as long. "Can't say I blame 'em."

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"Barnes says he left early that morning to hitch a ride up there. His wife says he did. But I sort of get the feeling they'd really like to arrest him anyway."

I could see Dave was as troubled as I was by that statement. Then he added, "With cops up there talking to him, his wife says the boss at the place where he was trying to get a job . . . Well, it's not looking very likely now. Too bad, too, with his kids looking as scrawny as they do."

Dave shrugged, more as an expression of futility than anything.

We parted without mentioning the car over at the junkyard, the one I thought had been moved. The sheriff's people would really have a laugh over that. And I didn't want to embarrass Dave any more than I thought I already had. When it came right down to it, it might have been moved for reasons I couldn't even begin to think of. Or maybe I was wrong about what I had seen. A nagging feeling wasn't enough, and in the end I felt a little silly about even bringing it up to Lillie.

"The bellows on that old forge was in good shape," I said to Lillie. "There was plenty of coal left from heating the shop last winter. And I finally got the hang of how much air to pump."

We were sitting on our back porch looking out on the yard. It was shaded and cooled by a couple of enormous walnut trees her grandfather had the foresight to plant about fifty years ago.

Billy was down in a patch of dirt nearby, playing an intense game of marbles with one of the neighborhood boys. Under his friend's coaching, he seemed to be catching on to the basic idea of the game, which was to shoot a marble with your thumb and knock as many of your opponent's marbles out of a circle as you can.

"You actually fired it up?" Lillie said.

"And I put the fender from the Dodge on it. I had a couple of those dents worked out in nothing flat. There's a couple of minor wrinkles I'll have to fill by melting some solder into them, but if I'm careful not to bang it out in the other direction, it saves a lot of time."

"Does this mean you won't be calling a junkyard to pick up your little project?" Lately, she had started calling it my 'little project.' Probably to encourage me.

I smiled. "Someone told me I shouldn't get into the habit of not finishing something I've started."

"Good advice, whoever it was."

We quietly watched the boys' game for a few moments, but my thoughts were somewhere else.

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I was finally remembering the other thing that had seemed a little off. It was that patch of bare dirt. It should have been just a patch of bare dirt, but one spot alongside the wreck showed signs of having been disturbed by footprints. Some of the surrounding weeds had been broken down, too, and were beginning to dry up. There had been some recent activity there, but I simply couldn't imagine what part they would have been after.

Another idea began sneaking into my mind, trying to attract my attention, and I realized I might indeed have an idea why that junker had been moved. But it was an idea so outlandish I was hardly prepared to discuss it . . . even with myself.

I kept thinking about the old junker the next morning as I was watching Mr. Samuelson's fender sitting in the coals of the forge. I was watching it closely because working with the old Dodge fender had taught me that all I needed was a soft reddish glow that would let me push the metal easily. Get it too hot and the sheet metal wants to melt or stretch. But doing what I was doing still left plenty of time to wonder about those footprints.

In the afternoon, Lillie stopped by the shop and spent a moment looking over what I had been doing. The fender was back on Mr. Samuelson's car. I was using a file to smooth out the solder I had melted into a few remaining wrinkles.

"It looks very nice," she said.

"It's about ready to take over to the paint shop in the county seat," I said, running my fingers over the formerly dented fender of the Plymouth and thinking maybe that old body man might approve.

"Have you thought about painting it yourself?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"I don't have a spray gun, and I don't know how to use one to paint a car anyway."

"Seems to me, you'll have a lot of painting to do on that little project of yours."

It took only a half second to know where she was going with this.

"It takes a lot of practice to get a good even coat on a curved surface."

"It looks like you have one about ready to practice on." She pointed at the fender from the old Dodge I'd been using to test my techniques with the old forge. "You already have a compressor. Do you think a spray gun and some paint might cost you less than what you would pay sending it out?"

Actually, I had thought about it. For about a second and a half. It would be just one more thing I would have to learn how to do.

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"I think you'll do all right. You can do anything when you set your mind to it," she said with a broad smile.

I wasn't sure she was right about that, but it was nice to hear the words anyway.

Later, I spent a restless night. I wasn't only worrying about how to spray an even coat of paint on a curved surface. It was the disturbed dirt. And the other thing that had been creeping into my mind when I tried to imagine why it had been disturbed. If I didn't have another look, it was going to bother me forever. Sleep came only after I made a couple of decisions about the next day.

First, I would go over to the county seat to see about a spray gun and paint. And I would go have another look at the old junker. It was stretching it more than a little to say it was part of the same trip because Cluff's was in the opposite direction. Still, I would stretch it.

And second, I wouldn't mention the stretch to Lillie or anyone else.

When I left the house the next morning, I was wearing a disguise. No, not like you think. I wasn't dressed up like Charlie Chan. But it occurred to me that I ought to wear something different when I showed up again at Cluff's. Perhaps a different shirt and cap would at least postpone immediate recognition. I'd often had the experience of not immediately recognizing someone when I had seen them in an unaccustomed place or in unfamiliar clothing.

On my way, I stopped at the gas station to get a few gallons to see me through my errands. The owner was another of my neighbors who lived just a few houses away. He recognized me immediately, of course. But then, he knew me well and I was sure he had seen me wearing this same outfit before. While he was levering gas up into the big glass reservoir of the pump stand, I thought to ask if he had noticed a Packard passing through in the late afternoon a few days ago.

"Sure. Nice car. Be hard to forget. Stopped here and I filled his tank all the way up too."

"Was anyone with the driver when he was here?"

"Nope, by himself, he was. Least, when he came in. Saw a feller get into his car while he was stopped waitin' for traffic to clear on the highway."

"Did you see who it was who got in the Packard?"

"No one I know."

"Wasn't anyone from town, then?"

"Could'a been Herbert Hoover, but I doubt it," he said, smiling

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at his own joke. "Didn't get a real good look, and I had another car come in right then."

I wondered if he might have recognized Barnes if it had been him. Maybe, but I decided not to mention him. I thought about stopping off and mentioning this to Dave, but decided to put it off until after all my errands.

At the moment, I had other things to think about. Such as an excuse for poking around the junkyard again. There was no circumstance I could think of where an ordinary person would simply show up saying, "I just want to have a look around." It took only a moment to decide I could be looking for a replacement radiator for Mrs. Constantine's car. While she hadn't actually asked me to repair it, it was likely she would sometime soon. When she did, a serviceable one from a junkyard might even be less expensive for her than having hers rebuilt. It seemed a safe request because I thought I had seen a couple of junkers of the same year as hers.

The morning started well. The paint dealer had a used spray gun and air regulator, both in almost new condition. And he agreed to sell me the equipment and paint on credit until I was paid by Mr. Samuelson. I left there feeling quite optimistic about the day.

The feeling lasted almost all the way to Cluff's. By the time I got to the junkyard, I had worked up a pretty big helping of nerves, and it wouldn't have taken a lot to get me to turn around and hightail it back to my shop. I parked and looked the place over. There were several cars parked in front, indicating there were other customers in the place. That was good. And the old tow truck was absent, as was the newer one. I hoped the mechanic I had encountered before was out on a tow and that meant I likely wouldn't be running into him. That was even better.

With a deep breath, I grabbed my bag of tools and stepped inside. The moment I did, the feeling returned that I had seen the proprietor before, and this time I remembered where it could have been. It was the gray, almost white hair on his temples that was familiar. I had seen the same flash of white on the passenger of the tow truck that was pulling the Cadillac a few days ago. I asked myself if he could have been the man seen getting into Murdock's Packard by the gas station a few days ago. I also asked myself what the Sam Hill I thought I was doing here and whether I should be quickly turning around and getting back to work in my shop.

Cluff looked up from a ledger he was making entries in. He recognized me at once and spent a moment looking me over before speaking in a voice that was almost a challenge.

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"What y' lookin' for this time?"

So much for my disguise. Maybe I should have tried the Charlie Chan, I thought, but I was too nervous to think it was funny. I quickly described the radiator of Mrs. Constantine's car.

"Fourth row down, go left, and then about halfway to the fence. I remember the radiator on that one looked pretty clean inside."

He quoted a price and pointed to the lot with his thumb. "If you think it'll do y', go ahead and take it off," he said.

As I walked out into the lot, I held my breath and glanced back toward the office. Through the window I could see him staring at me. I smiled and pointed in the direction he had indicated. He nodded his head and I turned and hurried on. The car with the radiator was on the opposite side of the lot from the car I had really come to see, but I thought it wise to at least check out the radiator first. It was indeed in good shape. The inside passages appeared to be clean, the outside had no solder repairs I could see, and the fins were not damaged. I thought it would appear strange if I didn't take it, so I went to work. A half hour later the radiator was in one hand and my bag of tools in the other as I set about, well, getting lost. At least that's what I'd say if anyone ran across me wandering around.

There was no trouble finding the wreck that had been moved, and it was exactly as I remembered. The dirt exposed by moving had indeed been disturbed, footprints, dead weeds, and all.

I glanced around to see if anyone would be able to see what I was about to do. The customers whose cars I had seen were nowhere to be seen, and the manager was hopefully still in his office. I took another deep breath and quickly opened the driver's door and ducked inside the car. I was familiar with this model, and I knew the floorboards were easily removed for access to the battery and the brake and clutch mechanisms. Pulling it up took only a moment.

The soil underneath was loose from having been disturbed, even showing the marks of a shovel used to smooth it. I looked around again to see if I was alone. No matter who might come along, I knew I'd have trouble explaining what I was doing. Using the end of a large wrench, I began to paw at the soft earth. Time immediately seemed to slow down, and the heat inside the old car quickly became oppressive. A sense of urgency began to work its way up my spine and forced me to stop every few moments to check the area to see if I was still alone. Eventually, my wrench struck something immovable that could have been a rock or maybe an old root.

I gingerly used my hand to pull the soil away from it. It wasn't either one, and somehow I had known it wouldn't be. After a lit-

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tle more digging and a little struggle to free it, I dropped it and the wrench in my tool bag. In the end, I wasn't as surprised at what I'd found as I was by how shallow it had been buried.

The aisles were still empty as I hurried along what I hoped was the most direct route to the office. Actually, I was beginning to think of it as my escape route. My stomach was starting to feel a bit queasy by then, and the hairs on my neck felt as stiff as porcupine quills. That, along with dragging the radiator and my heavy tool bag, made me feel like I was trying to ford a river of thick mud that was growing wider with each step.

I must have been putting too much attention on what I was carrying in my tool bag because I discovered I had taken a wrong turn and was halfway down an aisle that was blocked toward the far end. I had begun to retrace my steps when I glimpsed, through the layers of cars between me and the office, the mechanic I had hoped to avoid seeing. He was walking purposefully along in the next aisle, swinging a large monkey wrench in one hand. He was either planning to remove a very large nut from some bolt or he was looking for me. It took only a few seconds to decide which it most likely was. When he reached the next corner—sometime in the next half minute—he would certainly spot me. Whatever his purpose, I didn't want to enter into any kind of conversation with him. Especially if he thought to check the old junker. In that moment, I remembered I hadn't replaced the floorboard and it would be easy to see that the soil under it had been freshly stirred up.

I began to quickly search for a way over, around, or through the stack of cars that stood in the way of the right path to the front of the yard.

My eye was caught by one of the vehicles in the stack blocking the aisle. It was the remains of a panel truck, and I moved to it. Surprisingly, the rear door opened with little resistance and noise. I could see that if I went through it and out one of the missing side doors there might be space enough to slip between a couple of cars on the other side. It was a tight squeeze, but a moment later, breathing heavily and nursing a few scratches, I was into the next aisle. I knew those scratches and a couple of tears in my shirt were going to make it difficult to convince Lillie that I had spent an uneventful morning.

Looking back, I had a glimpse of the mechanic. He had turned the corner and was searching around the area I had just left. If I could see him through the spaces between cars, it was possible he could see me, and it would take him only a few seconds to turn

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back. There wasn't time to get to the end of the aisle and around the corner.

I scanned the next row of cars for a way through. Still clutching my bag of tools and with the radiator under my arm, I ducked between a couple of cars. There wasn't enough room to get through, and I came back out and tried the next space. Another scratch and another tear later, I was through, breathing heavily and still hanging awkwardly onto my bag and the radiator. Why I hadn't abandoned the radiator, I have no idea. Probably too frightened to engage the brain.

A couple of shortcuts and turns and twists later, I was nearing the office. Another customer was headed in the same direction with a steering wheel and column over his shoulder. I hurried along so I could get there first and conclude my business while he was still around. Trying to get my breathing under control, I approached the office.

"Find what y' were looking for?" Cluff said with a scowl as I walked in.

My stomach did a flop, and for a second I thought perhaps he knew what I had really been up to out there. I tried to believe it was simply what he said to everybody as I held up the radiator where he could see it and quickly dropped several coins on the counter.

"This was the price, right?" I asked.

I thought he wanted to say more but stopped when the other customer walked in behind me. He nodded and slid the coins into a drawer. Maybe it was only the anxiety I was feeling, but it seemed the air between us was charged with a few unsaid words as he glanced from me to the customer with the steering wheel.

I felt his eyes on me all the way out the door.

Dave was in his kitchen having lunch when I called on him. I declined his wife's offer to join them and motioned for him to follow me out onto the porch where I had left my bag of tools.

"There's a body buried under a car over at Cluff's," I said.

The hair on my neck was still dancing and my stomach was still afflicted with unusual sensations.

"Whose body?"

"The missing banker's, I'd bet."

"You're sure?"

"If it's not him, it's somebody."

I unstrapped my tool bag, reached inside, and handed him the shoe I had pried off the foot.

Dave turned it over in his hands and flicked a fingernail at the

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dirt still clinging to the crevices around the sole. I quickly explained how I had come to discover it and how I had avoided what might have been, well, an ugly confrontation. He paused to look me square in the eye before he spoke.

"Now, Cliff . . . knowin' you might not be welcome, you went over there by your lonesome?"

"After the Packard thing . . ."

He paused for a moment. Looking me in the eye, he said, "You'll recall it was only the sheriff who had a problem with that."

I thought I could sense his disappointment that I might have doubted his friendship. The expression on my face must have shown my embarrassment because he placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"Now, how do you suppose this came to end up over there?" he said as he stared at the shoe he was holding in his other hand.

The advice of the old body man came to mind. About the point of first impact. "It may not mean anything, but from time to time I used to see a newer tow truck with their name on it. But I haven't seen it lately, and it wasn't there either time I was over there. What they seem to be using is an old one that looks pretty beat up. Maybe the sheriff ought to be looking at why they're still usin' it . . . maybe see if there was some kind of business connection with the bank or the banker."

I also told him what Frank at the filling station had observed and added, "I saw the old Cluff tow truck passing through town about that same time. And it would have been about the same time as Mrs. Constantine and Mrs. Samuelson saw the Packard with two people in it."

Dave listened carefully as I went on. "There were two people in the tow truck when I saw it. I think one of them could have been the fellow Frank saw getting into the banker's car while it stopped by the highway. I also think it could have been Cluff."

Dave thought that over for a beat.

"Makes sense," he said, his face moving toward a smile. "If we don't lose any time, maybe that body'll still be there. I'll be right back." He handed me the shoe and walked into the house. A few moments later he came back, followed by his wife.

"The sheriff said he and a few deputies will be over right away. He thinks both of us ought to go along. I guess you'll have to show 'em where to dig." He turned to his wife. "Help me look for that badge they gave me, will you, Sally? I think I put it somewhere a while back."

"So that's where you were all morning," Lillie said when I finished

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giving her a slightly varnished account of my day. Well, maybe highly varnished. I had left out a few details.

Based on the reaction of the manager and his mechanic when the sheriff arrived, prepared to do some digging, Dave's opinion was that I had indeed been plain lucky. By then I had managed to convince myself that I had also been plain foolish.

The sheriff's men commandeered the truck with the funny looking derrick on the back, and the old wreck was lifted off and put aside. After only a little digging, the body was found where I said it was. And it was who I thought it was, homburg and all.

"You went to the shop this morning?" I asked.

"No, but Mrs. Constantine did. She brought over a peach pie and said your shop was closed both times she went by."

"She has a problem with her radiator."

"You know about it?"

"I knew it was going to be a problem soon."

"She's planning to visit her daughter and her family. She doesn't want to be filling her radiator every few miles and she wants you to fix it."

"I think I can help her with that." I shuddered, picturing myself frantically clutching the radiator and trying not to ding the fins as I stumbled around between the wrecks. Given a little time, perhaps the picture would even seem funny.

We were sitting on the front porch. Billy was in bed and we were watching afternoon shadows turn into night. A few rays of the sun were still clinging to the hills in the distance. I was content to just sit there next to Lillie and watch it happen.

Dave stopped by just as darkness was closing in. "There was a connection," he said as he sank into a chair.

"There was real bad blood between Cluff and the banker and it was over a loan Cluff used to buy his new truck last year. He had trouble makin' payments on the truck, and Murdock repossessed it a few weeks ago and sold it right away for what the outstanding loan balance was. Cluff thought the banker had been hasty and figured the truck was worth a lot more and he should have at least gotten some of his equity out of it."

"Doesn't seem like enough to do murder," Lillie said.

"You wouldn't think so. But the head teller over at the bank said Murdock refused to talk to Cluff, and Cluff was really put out about it. Cluff may have seen Murdock as he was passin' by the gas station and decided it was a good time to have a talk. It all might have started with a little confrontation."

"When Mrs. Samuelson saw the Packard out on the highway, she thought they were having a big argument," I said.

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"What killed Murdock was a bullet in the heart. What she saw might have been leadin' up to that."

"And Cluff saw how the Packard might make up for what he thought he'd lost on his tow truck equity."

"Prob'ly, but so far he's not talking about that or anythin' else. That mechanic he has over there, that's a different story. Turns out he's no stranger up at the state prison. Claims when he came back from dropping off a car they'd been towing, the Packard was in their shop and Murdock was dead. All he admits to is helping put the body under that junked car you found."

"I hope that was enough for the sheriff to keep him."

Dave nodded. "They've already traced the Packard to one of Cluff's friends who was about to take it to another state to sell it for him. The sheriff is keeping the friend too."

"What's going to happen to the bank?" Lillie asked.

"It'll probably close. The examiners found Murdock was in a precarious position, overextended with loans, and before the crash he'd been into stocks more than he should have been. It's possible he could have pulled out of it by being as cutthroat as he seems to have been lately, but with the way things turned out, I guess it won't happen. They'll close it up and liquidate. Turns out the Packard was in the bank's name, so they'll be liquidatin' that too. I told the sheriff if they send anyone over to pick up that tire for it, to have them bring your fee for fixin' it."

"It's not important," I said. "They can have the tire. They ought to try to save the bank."

"They say people would have no confidence even if they tried to keep it open."

"People are going to be hurt," I said.

"Including Willy Barnes. He's back in town. No longer under any suspicion, but he's not going to get that job he was trying to get. And the examiners will probably go ahead with foreclosure on his house. A lot of others, too, I guess."

"I suppose there's nothing can be done."

"Prob'ly not. But my wife tells me things have been showing up on the Barnes doorstep the last few days."

"Things?"

"Bag of flour. Bag of potatoes. Eggs. A few other things."

"All anonymous I suppose?"

"Didn't hear of any notes being left." He rose to leave. "By the way, the sheriff said next time you start feelin' restless 'bout anything, he'd be glad to arrange some company for you." He winked and waved a good night.

"Dave can sure change the subject fast, can't he?" I said as the

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sound of his truck faded away down the street.

"Anonymous . . . as in Dave?"

"Or his wife. Sure as the sun rises in the east."

Lillie smiled and sat quietly for a time. Finally she broke the silence, "I suppose it just slipped your mind to tell me you were going to go over to that junkyard."

Her words were mild, but they were strong enough to suggest she thought I might have done smarter things in my life.

"I thought Dave might have been a little disappointed too," I said.

She put a finger in a small tear in my sleeve and moved it around the edges.

"Now tell me the things you left out."

See, Lillie always knows when I leave things out. Even without the evidence of the tear, she would have known. I don't know how she knows, but she does. What could I do? I told her.

"So why did you think you had to do the looking?"

"Because after the debacle with the Packard, what would they think if I told them *I thought* or *maybe* there might be a body under an old car over there?"

"I think you know where Dave stands. And he just delivered the sheriff's apology about that." Her lips turned up in a rueful smile and she shook her head.

"I started this thing when I saw the Packard. Someone told me once, if you start something, you should always try to finish it."

I thought it was a good try, but the only thing I got out of that comment was a good poke in the ribs. A really good poke in the ribs.

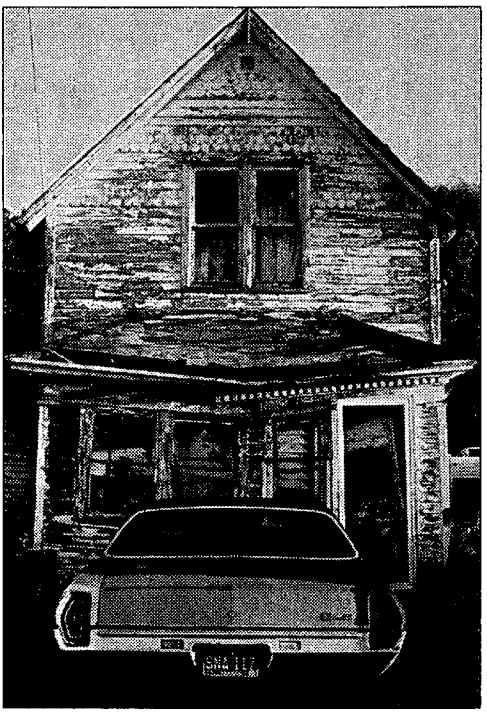
When Mr. Samuelson came to pick up his car a couple of days later, he spent a long moment looking at my shiny new paint job on his fender and running board. Then another moment glancing over the rest of the car where the original paint was beginning to fade.

"Cliff, how would you like to repaint the whole thing?"

"Sure, I can handle that," I said quickly . . . and without, um, thinking. When I came to my senses, I realized what I had done. Again. But then, I knew what Lillie would say when I told her about it.

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Susan Alinangan / Images.com

Be It Ever So Humble . . .

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

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UNSOLVED

LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING

Quality Plus Corporation sells bulk auto parts through outlets in four cities, each managed by an agent. Recently, a problem arose: Somebody is cheating.

President Armstrong called in Bea Sharpe, private investigator. "It's driving me mad," he declared. "The total money turned in by our four agents in Frankfurt, Georgetown, Huntington, and Jackson is substantially less than the value of items sold."

"Just what is involved?" asked Ms. Sharpe.

Armstrong answered, "We handle bulk lots of four items: carburetors valued at $1,000 a case lot, timers valued at $1,500 a case, spark plugs valued at $4,000 a case, and crankshafts worth $2,500 a case."

"Any possibility, sir, that some crates are stolen?"

"None whatever! There have been no break-ins at any of those four outlets. It has to be an inside job. One of my agents is pocketing corporation funds."

Bea Sharpe inquired, "Sir, may I see the paperwork on these suspect sales and returns?"

"Gladly," replied Armstrong. "Here are the figures for last week. As you can see, they do not balance. I need to have this cleared up before my corporation is bankrupt."

Ms. Sharpe noted the following:

1. No agent sold the same number of cases of two different items (carburetors, timers, spark plugs, and crankshafts), varying from 3 to 6.

2. Each item had a different number of sales at each of the four outlets, although total number of sales was the same at each outlet.

3. The number of carburetor cases sold (at $1,000 each) included: 3 by Dan, 4 by Mr. Wilkes, and 5 by the agent in Huntington.

4. Al sold 4 cases of crankshafts, valued at $2,500 each.

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5. The number of cases of spark plugs sold (at $2,000 each) included: 4 by Mr. Vincent and 5 by Cal (who is not the Frankfurt agent).

6. The number of timer cases sold (at $1,500 each) included: 3 by Bob, 4 by Mr. Tolliver, and 5 by the Georgetown agent.

7. Mr. Upson sold more timers than carburetors. He turned in exactly $500 more than the agent in Jackson.

8. The Frankfurt agent turned in $33,000, which was exactly $500 more than was turned in by the Georgetown agent.

Bea Sharpe spent an hour with her pocket calculator. She reported to Mr. Armstrong, "I wish all my cases were this easy. It's plain enough. You'd better have _____ _____ arrested immediately, before he puts you out of business."

Who is skimming money from his auto parts sales?

The answer will appear in the December issue.

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

LUSLWDB LUSFDSLWP RW BTHB USQJ D LUCQP LHBLT BTW VWYZUS PHYDSN HSP GDBBJ WSUCNT BU ODQQ RW. D GDZTWP BU EW HQDFW BU PU ZU.

—YWI ZBUCB

CIPHER: _

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 140

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HOMESTEAD

REX BURNS

After congratulating Aboriginal Liaison Constable Leonard Smith for completing his first aid refresher course, Senior Sergeant Dugald of the Broome Station asked, "By the way, are you acquainted with Phyllis Blankett of the Marna Jarndu Refuge?"

Not as much as he would like to be. "Yes, sir."

"Good. She's requested a police inquiry concerning one of her clients. Interview her. If there's substance to her request, go out to the Jeremy Hunter station and get the truth of the story." He added, "But not until Friday." The senior sergeant's tired eyes gazed through the window at the traffic in hot and muggy Hammersly Street. He spoke as much to himself as to Constable Smith. "We'll need every warm body we can muster for Thursday night."

Thursday was dole day for Broome's Aboriginals. This year, Thursday was also New Year's Eve. The usual Aboriginal drunks in the town's parks and streets would be reinforced by drunks of all kinds using the holiday as an excuse for a bash. It was, S. S. Dugald said, a fine example of Reconciliation.

Phyllis Blankett wasn't happy that ALC Smith would wait two days before responding to what she considered an immediate threat of bodily harm. Her voice—usually pleasant on the few times they'd spoken—grew icy. "You really believe that man's story?"

Jeremy Hunter, his wife Cindy, and their five-year-old daughter Melissa had been treated for injuries at Broome Hospital. Hunter said they were hurt in a roll-over. His wife said nothing. The attending physician said he doubted the injuries came from an automobile accident and asked Phyllis Blankett to talk with Cindy. She did, and then requested an urgent police inquiry into possible spousal abuse by Jeremy Hunter.

"No." Leonard poured more coffee, dodging the angry glint in Phyllis's large, dark eyes. "But right now there's little evidence to prove it a lie, isn't there?" He thought that meeting her over lunch would make news of the delay more palatable. He was wrong.

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Anger tightened the corners of the woman's mouth, making her lips even fuller. "Cindy Hunter as much as told me that Jeremy got blotto and hit her and Melissa."

"'As much as' isn't a complaint, Phyllis. That's why Senior Sergeant wants me to go out and see if there's support for your suspicion." Leonard had thought, some six months past, that the little tingle he felt on first meeting Phyllis might have been shared by her. Certainly, the occasional chats they had when duties called him to Broome seemed welcoming enough to let Leonard's imagination run a bit.

But there was no welcome now. She jabbed her fork into the *barramundi* brought by the smiling waitress. "Let the Abos kill each other, is that it? You're just another bloody copper, aren't you?"

"Just another bloody copper," he agreed mildly. "But if Cindy won't file a charge, there's not much any bloody copper can do." He added, "And you know how tomorrow night's going to be—everyone'll be needed here in Broome."

The fork wagged. "Think Jeremy's going to stay sober?" Her dark eyes gazed at some scene beyond the Christmas tinsel decorating a corner of the restaurant. "I told her to take Melissa to the shelter when they left hospital. But she needed a court order to take the child, and Jeremy would object to that, she said. Said she and Melissa best get back to the station."

Leonard nodded. "Cindy stays with the roll-over story, the court has no authority to take Jeremy's child from him."

"He'll get drunk again and kill them. You know that."

He knew such had happened in the past. He knew such was possible in the future. "Maybe Social Services can go out sooner. Maybe the Violence Patrol."

One of the Aboriginal community projects designed to defuse alcohol-related problems and to help victims of abuse, the Violence Patrol was active in the settlements as well as in keeping grog out of alcohol-free reserves.

"Hunter Station's too far out for the Patrol, Leonard. You know that. And Social Services need 'evidence' before they act." The woman's anger drained away. "Can't blame you for doing nothing, I suppose. Even the elders have trouble keeping up with it. More and more grog's coming onto the reserves. And even the kids are sniffing petrol and aerosol."

Petrol fumes and aerosol cans: the sniffers' faves—cheap to buy and easy to carry to outback camps. Leonard, happy to find a point they could agree on, nodded. "And it seems to be getting worse."

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Which only rekindled the woman's anger. "Well you're the bloody copper! Do something about it!"

Friday morning and still weary from a long night wrestling rowdy drunks, Leonard followed the red sand track that twisted under tree limbs leafless this late in the Dry. Struggling to stay awake in the tepid breeze from the truck's aircon, he stopped the Tojo 4-Runner where a little-used bush track branched off. It led toward a broad expanse of gray, sun-cracked clay, the bottom of a shallow lake that, maybe this year, would fill with the pending rains of the Wet. Hunter's station, the map told him, was somewhere in empty space just below the boundary of the Beagle Bay Reserve. His GPS told him where he sat. But connecting dots in this vacant corner of the Kimberley was always a challenge.

Yawning widely and rubbing his eyes, he studied the horizon. Scattered across a gently rolling plain, drought-seared trees and clumps of grass shimmered in midday heat and humidity. Checking the petrol and temperature gauges, he swung onto the ill-marked track. An hour should tell him if he'd guessed right.

Finally the tire tracks lifted out of the clay bed to become mashed vegetation and sandy grooves that meandered past termite mounds rising out of the brown grass like giant fungi. Once he saw the ears of a kangaroo silhouetted in the shade of a dead-looking acacia tree. But the animal did not run. It was too hot for such effort. The track tilted downhill between shelves of red rock toward a fringe of green trees. This close to the monsoons, trees kept their leaves only because their roots could reach water, and sure enough, minutes later he saw a stubby windmill and a cluster of rusted metal roofs.

Leonard pulled his Tojo into the yard and turned off the motor. A hammer clanged somewhere in the barn, and from its dark doorway a cattle dog walked arthritically toward him. The dog's head was down, and its tail wagged slowly as if used to greeting strangers. The hammering stopped and a man in sweat-darkened khaki emerged from the barn. His heavy shoes crunched the hot, gravelly earth.

"Jeremy Hunter? G'day." Leonard got out of the truck.

"G'day." In the shadow beneath a tattered hat brim, bloodshot eyes studied Leonard and his uniform. One eye was still a bit swollen, and a week-old cut marked a corner of his mouth. "Who's your mum?"

It was a familiar kinship-greeting between strangers, but the tone wasn't friendly.

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"Annie Smith, Yawuru nation. I'm Liaison Constable Leonard Smith." He offered his hand, but Hunter ignored it. Given the aroma of stale sweat, anger, and plonk surrounding the man, Leonard was a bit relieved. "How about you? Who're your people?"

"Beagle Bay Mangala. What d'you want here?"

The home of the Mangala language was some three hundred kilometers south. But language groups from all over the Kimberley—remnants that had occupied various territories now claimed by whites—had been uprooted to the Beagle Bay Reserve. "Came by to see how your wife and daughter are doing."

"They be fine."

"Good news, that." Between the homestead and barn, rusty chicken wire surrounded a roost on tall poles with snake baffles. In its shade, a dozen chooks spread their wings in the cooler sand and panted. "You had a bingle, I hear. Tell me about it."

"Going too bloody fast, turned too sharp in the sand." Hunter shrugged. "Me own bloody fault." He added, "No other car hurt—none around."

Leonard nodded and glanced around. All the buildings showed their age, but patches of newer gray paint revealed attempts to cover those boards in worst condition. A well-oiled windmill, locked at present, loomed over a rust-streaked water tank. Halfway between the homestead and barn, a two-door dunny tilted. No electric poles led to the station. A wisp of wood smoke rose from the dry stone chimney of the kitchen. "Is this freehold or lease?"

Pastoral leases were usually assigned to Aboriginal corporations for grazing stock. But since indigenous peoples could now own land—or, as many said, buy some of their land back—a few Aboriginals had left the reserves for freeholds. Some simply wanted a place of their own, others wanted to live closer to town for the education and jobs that weren't available on the reserves. But not many could afford to buy even a rundown station like this.

"Freehold. I'm paying on it—rent-to-own, like."

"Good on you. Nice place," he lied. "Run much stock?"

"Not much—some cattle. Enough to make the payments."

A few decades ago it would have been sheep. Now only cows could survive on overgrazed pasture like this, and few of those. "Cindy around?"

"Why?"

"Auto accident, serious injury—your wife broke her collarbone and wrist. Was treated for facial cuts and bruises. Your daughter was treated for scrapes and brain swelling. Three days in hospital." Leonard wagged his head. "Serious injury calls for a police inquiry.

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And when the medico heard I was coming out, he asked me to check on them."

Hunter frowned but said nothing.

"So I'm here to check on them. And to make a report on the accident."

Hunter turned abruptly. "Let's get out of the sun, then."

He followed the man onto the groaning boards of the veranda. Even in the shade of its tin roof, the air was thick and hot. Hunter called through the clear plastic strips of the fly curtain dangling across the doorway. "Cindy! Oy, Cindy—copper's here to check up on you!"

A sound of movement from the rear of the homestead answered Hunter's call. Then Cindy Hunter stepped through the strips, wiping her long fingers on a drying rag. Adhesives marked her face. The ruptured veins in one eye still looked red, and a cast covered her left wrist. Leonard said who he was and what he wanted.

The woman glanced at her husband before she answered softly, "It was an accident. Ute rolled over."

"How's Melissa?"

"She's okay. She's asleep right now. Doctor said she would sleep a lot. You want to see her?"

"Take a peek, yeah."

He followed the thin woman through the living room to an open door. On a pallet a few inches above the floor of the small bedroom, the child slept under a worn sheet. Her black hair splayed out on a pillow whose darned slip also showed a lot of washing. Long, deep breaths sounded in the girl's half open mouth.

Leonard quietly led Cindy back to the front porch. "She complain of any headaches? Vision problems?"

Cindy shook her head. "No."

"Any vomiting? Bleeding from her eyes, ears, or mouth?" He had not thought his first aid refresher course would apply so soon.

"No."

"And you? Any infection? Fever?"

"No."

"Anything you need to go back to hospital for?"

Jeremy spoke up. "They need anything, I can take them."

Leonard studied Cindy's face, but it remained taut and impassive. He hadn't expected her to tell him much: Her husband was listening. He was a man, and worse, he was a copper. But the swelling in the woman's face seemed to be gone, and the medico would not have let Melissa out of hospital if the pressure on her brain remained. "How long have you and Jeremy lived here?"

Another uneasy glance at her husband. "Four years, maybe."

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He thanked the woman. She disappeared back into the house. Leonard said, "Let's take a look at your auto."

"What for?"

"Need to assess damage for my report."

"Wasn't much damage. We rolled upright again."

"Back up on the wheels?"

"Yeah. Like being in a bloody washing machine."

"Got to see that!"

"It's in the barn."

The dimness of the large building smelled of animal urine, dust, old straw. A Ford F-150, two or three years old, showed rusty scrapes of much use in its tray. But the only dents were low on the right front fender behind the 'roo bar that guarded the grill.

"Nice truck. Time payments?"

"What else?"

Leonard stepped up on the running board and scanned the top of the cab. "Not a scratch up here!"

"Like I said, it was soft sand. Went over once and popped up again. I hung on to the steering wheel, but Cindy and 'Lissa got bounced."

"Hell of a Christmas present. Seat belts in use?"

Hunter's thumb touched the fresh scar at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, of course. It's the law, eh?"

"Sure is." He jotted down the vehicle's license plate number, glanced behind the sunshield for insurance documents. There were none. "You'll want proof of insurance when you drive off your property."

"Yeah. Don't do that much."

He did not ask how Cindy and Melissa were taken to hospital or where the nearest servo was for gasoline. "All right—injuries suffered in a roll-over. We'll leave it at that."

In the recesses of the barn, an ancient workbench held a few hand tools. A vise and hammer showed that Hunter had been banging crooked nails straight for reuse. A rusty wheelbarrow nosed into a corner. Larger implements—shovel, posthole digger, pickax—were propped against a wall where large nails held a few coils of rope, links of rusty chain, two or three loops of what looked like rubber tubing. A scarred ladder nailed between posts led up to the hayloft where a rope and set of pullies were tied off. One of the animal stalls was empty. The other held a pile of miscellaneous bottles and a small stack of white ten-liter buckets with their lids pressed shut.

Leonard ran his hand over one of the buckets, feeling a light film of dust on its curved side. "What are these for?"

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"Don't know. Here when we moved in. Like the bottles. Might find a use for them someday."

Leonard nodded again. When you lived beyond Whoop Whoop, you never threw anything away, even bent nails. As soon as you did, you needed it.

In the rearview mirror, Jeremy Hunter stood like a dark statue, watching Leonard's vehicle bounce away. He had expected an invitation to supper and the offer of a place to throw his swag. Not only was hospitality the rule at every station in the outback, but it was part of Aboriginal law. He could still hear his Aunt Daisy's voice, "The last thing you have, you must give," and, "In the outback, accidents happen, so you don't neglect your neighbor." But instead of offering even grudging hospitality, Hunter had warned that coming rains could turn the clay flat into a lake and give Leonard a two-hundred-kilometer drive around it. "Best you be going before that happens."

A bend in the track pinched the figure out of his rearview mirror. Another kilometer carried the sound of Leonard's vehicle away from the homestead. Then he turned off the track behind a clump of leafless acacia and parked. A haze had begun to soften the late afternoon sun, and in the humidity he felt sweat run down his ribs. He rummaged in the Engel cooler, powered by the Tojo's battery, for a bite of banger and cheese. Then, urged by the questions he had been framing, he opened the windows a bit so sun-heated air would not blow out the locked cab's glass and walked back toward the Hunter homestead.

He was not worried about the cattle dog. Despite this seemingly empty land, it seemed used to strangers. But he did move slowly enough to study what was ahead, and it took an hour to loop almost completely around the thin smoke from the chimney before he spotted a touch of husbandry out of place in the bush: a line of clipped limbs and an occasional freshly cut stump. Crouched and still, he studied the work. It ran from the front veranda, not fifty meters away, to some point farther out. Paralleling the alley of cuttings, he picked his way in slow steps until he saw, at ankle height, an almost invisible trip wire strung from one shrub to another. Here and there along the wire dangled rusted tin cans. On the other side of the wire, fresh earth had been thrown up in a berm half a meter high to surround a patch of cleared land.

Inside the berm, a sheet of white plastic covered about six square meters of leveled earth. Half a dozen twenty-five-liter plas-

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tic containers were spaced across the sheet, their round lids pressed shut and sealed with tape. Three lids bore a painted number 1, and the remainder a 2. Dimly visible through the translucent sides of the sealed containers, smaller white buckets, the same kind as those in the barn, reached almost to the covers. Slow drops sweat down the insides of the outer containers.

It was a distilling operation, and the alley of cuttings served both as line-of-sight security and a direct path for that rusted wheelbarrow in the barn. Leonard guessed that the internal buckets held either fermented mash—number 1, or a first run of spirits undergoing a second distillation for greater strength—number 2. At its hottest, the sun and its reflection off the white plastic must have exceeded fifty degrees centigrade, more than enough to steam the mash. Even this late in the afternoon it must have been at least forty degrees. Though it would cool at night, the next sun would quickly heat it again.

Simple, economic, profitable, and, Leonard surmised, unlicensed. Because of the inconsistent heat, the process probably took several days. At a guess, each still pumped out a liter of moonshine every seventy-two hours. Double-distilled, it would smell like a dead camel and kick like a live one. But for customers who could stomach methylated spirits and mineral turpentine, flavor was less important than power. And conveniently near the reserve, the still had no closing hours and no limits on consumption.

The hike back to his truck went quickly, not so much because he moved faster but because his mind was on Hunter's business and on the man's wife and child. A telephone call to the Alcohol and Drug Coordination Unit—when Leonard could reach a spot where his mobile phone worked—would bring an end to this still and a hefty fine for Jeremy, which if he couldn't pay would mean lockup time and seizure of his homestead to pay the fine.

At his Tojo, Leonard warmed a tin of dog and washed it down with a cuppa. By the time he finished scrubbing his dishes with sand and rinsing them with a splash from the five-gallon water container, full night had come, with ragged patches of cloud drifting across the stars. In the dark north, flickers of distant lightning told where monsoon rains had begun to fall. If he were smart, he'd get on his way to Broome and the A and D Unit. But his eyes burned from lack of sleep, and his thoughts burned with more questions. He spread his swag on the sand to rest a bit and watch the stars wink out behind scudding shadows as his mind turned over first one option, then another.

A noise alien to the familiar night sounds broke into his

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thoughts. Breath held, he listened. Then it came again. Angry and abrupt, a distant human voice carried briefly through the muggy night. Leonard glanced at his wristwatch: half past eight. He gathered his canteen and torch, shook out his swag, and folded it into the Tojo. Then he started walking down the road toward Hunter homestead. Though lightning still played across the horizon, its thunder seemed no closer, and he was grateful for that.

Fire glinting through the brush led Leonard to a small clearing near the still. Using the shadows of trees and shrubs, feeling carefully for any trip wires, he worked his way closer. Jeremy and two men sat around the fire. One man was saying something Leonard could not make out. But Jeremy's head wagged and whatever he replied made the second man lean forward, a finger tapping his eye. His loud, angry voice came clearly, "You want some more like last time? You and Cindy and your kid? You like it that much?"

Jeremy's voice, too, rose—"Okay, okay!"—and dropped back into a murmur that placated the men.

After another muttered exchange, both men stood, heavy burlap sacks clutched in their hands. The first man said, "That's settled, then: You hold up your end, we do ours, everybody's happy. Hey, bro'?"

Jeremy stared into the flames. The two watched him for a long moment, then strode away from the fire, passing close to Leonard. The burlap sacks clinked and faded into the black.

Leonard listened to night sounds—the creak of a bat's voice, the distant howl of a dingo, something small rustling among drifts of dried seed husks beneath the shrubbery. Jeremy, still staring into the dying fire, muttered something to himself. Reaching into a shadow, he pulled out a bottle and tilted it for a long drink. Then another as he stared into embers that flared with the wind and died back. Finally the man drained the bottle and kicked sand over the coals and with another mumble staggered toward the homestead.

The cattle dog made a faint whining as it emerged from the gloom under the porch to sniff Leonard's now-familiar smell. He eased up onto the creaking boards and stood by the fly curtain of the open door. Beside his knee, the dog, afraid to go in but eager to hear someone come out, leaned an expectant nose into the room. A long snore rumbled to a choking high note and coughed into silence. In a few minutes came a softer, rhythmic snore. Leonard tapped his knuckles softly on the doorframe. Silence. When the heavy snoring started again, he tapped again. A creak of rusty springs and the floorboards squeaked, followed by a soft whisper, "Who's there?"

"Constable Smith."

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In the gloom a darker shadow held its breath. Then, "Jeremy, he's asleep. You come back tomorrow."

"It's you I want to talk with."

The floorboards creaked again as the shadow moved closer. "He wakes up, he be damn mad."

"He's drunk, Cindy. Out for hours. We have to talk."

"About what?"

"About you and your daughter being beaten. About why you wanted Phyllis Blankett to think Jeremy did it."

The woman, wearing a pale shift, came onto the porch. She slapped the dog's nose away from her crotch. "What you know?"

"I know it wasn't Jeremy. And I know that you, Jeremy, and Melissa might get hurt again."

Cindy's frown, visible in the thin light, showed she had already considered that. "I tell a copper anything, we get hurt a lot worse! They said so!"

"I already know about the moonshine. I know the still's right over there, and I know Jeremy's working with the people who beat you. What I don't know are their names." He led her by an arm off the porch and away from the snores. "You like this life? Always afraid? Melissa always in danger? That what you want?"

She said nothing.

"Tell me who those men are, Cindy. I can help, but you have to tell me."

Her reply was oblique. "Jeremy wants to buy this place. Family place for us mob. Raise our kids here. Our grandkids. Their kids. All ours—nobody take it from us!"

Leonard waited for more, but nothing was added. "Did those men give Jeremy money to set up the still? Is that it?"

No reply.

"The Elders won't allow a still on the reserve, right? So they talked Jeremy into setting it up here. And those men take the grog and sell it on the reserve."

"The people going to get their grog somewhere! And it's cheaper than at those white-man stores. Those white men charge eleven dollars for two-dollar goonie!" Her voice dropped back to a whisper: "The people drink Jeremy's grog, get drunk, and still have money left for food."

Which, if Jeremy needed convincing, was probably the argument the two men used. Well, more than one famous Australian label had started as a moonshine operation during Settlement, and Jeremy might become his country's most famous Aboriginal whiskey maker.

"Who are they, Cindy. Give me names."

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"I can't talk to you! They kill me—they kill Jeremy and Melissa! I can't tell you nothing!"

"But now Jeremy's drinking, too, isn't he? Tell me he's the same man drunk as he is sober. Maybe he'll get drunk and beat you and Melissa. You want your daughter brain damaged? Or if you're dead, who's going to look after her with those two around?" He paused. "He's turning into an alkie, Cindy. They're pushing him into it."

The woman stared at the dark ground.

"You don't want Jeremy in lockup. And you don't want to lose this homestead. But you're tired of being afraid. So here's what you do: Tell Jeremy to get rid of that still before I come back. And you give me the names of those two yahoos. I can fix it so they won't come after you."

Hugh Pat and Eddie Chatunalgi helped Jeremy make the down payment on the station. The agreement was that Jeremy would run their still, and Pat and Chatunalgi would keep Jeremy's third of the profits until his loan was paid off. But the still didn't produce as much grog as they thought it would, and when they told him to double its size, Jeremy was afraid that would attract the Alcohol and Drug agents who would seize his homestead. But Pat and Chatunalgi bought more buckets and hose and mash anyway, and when Jeremy said "no" again, they beat him up and thumped Cindy and Melissa for good measure. The night meeting Leonard had witnessed was their final warning to Jeremy: Make the still produce more, or else.

That was the story Cindy finally told Leonard. Later in the day, he repeated it to the trio of elders he met near Budgarjook Settlement. Like him, they sat cross-legged in the thin shade of a boab tree on the packed earth in front of the tiny porch of Elder Wongi's home. Across the dirt street and out of earshot, three kids squatted around a toy truck missing a wheel as they created a miniature world devoted to moving sand from one pile to another. The women of the settlement found chores away from the men's business.

After a polite silence, Elder Wongi said, "Lots of grog's been coming onto the reserve. We weren't sure where it was coming from."

"Jeremy's going to lose his station to the alcohol agents unless he shuts down that still."

One of the other elders, Graham Walley, cleared his throat. "Pat and Chatunalgi won't appreciate Jeremy doing that."

Leonard agreed. "There's not much the police can do about

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them. The still's on Jeremy's station. There's no evidence to show those two are involved in the operation, and buyers on the reserve won't dob in their suppliers. It would be Jeremy's word against those two, and the court would probably be satisfied with nabbing only him." Leonard let the elders consider that. "That's where you come in—tribal law."

The third elder looked up. "Coppers aren't keen on tribal law! You know that."

"What I don't know about, I can't report."

Walley asked, "That what you told Jeremy? You wouldn't report him to the alcohol agents?"

Leonard shrugged. "No still, no report." He added, "If keeping that station really is more important to him and Cindy than making grog, they can manage."

The silence was long and thoughtful. Finally, Wongi scratched in his short white beard. "Tribal law can be heavy business. Those two, they might be hurt real bad."

"They hurt Jeremy and Cindy and their daughter. They said they would hurt them worse. And they're hurting your people with grog."

The three elders said nothing more—at least not in front of Leonard—but he felt agreement in the air. When he thanked them for hearing him and took his leave, he had a good idea what would happen.

The rain began while the Tojo was still jolting over the rough track. At first the drops smacked fat and heavy against the earth, sending up puffs of dust, and then, like a faucet turned on suddenly, lightning split the dark sky and a torrent turned the earth into streaming mud. Lurching and jolting in the slick clay, the Tojo slid and splashed toward a horizon that was a gray band between the black of land and the black of low rain clouds. It would be good to reach the main track in another couple of hours. It would be better, in a couple of days, to read in the newspaper that Pat and Chatunalgi had been hospitalized from multiple spear wounds in the thighs for violating some tribal law and as a warning against further violation. The article would, of course, end with a lament about the brutality of native justice and a demand that the police be more vigilant in prohibiting it.

But best of all, it would be good to tell Phyllis Blankett that this bloody copper had done something.

Author's Note: Thanks, again, to Terry Thornett for his invaluable linguistic skills.

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REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

There's a lot at stake when the broadcast television networks announce their new fall schedules each May. Advertising execs are on the lookout for shows that'll keep the right kind of people (the affluent, spend-happy kind) glued to the tube. Rival nets are anxious to see what they'll be up against come autumn. And of course loyal fans are on pins and needles until they know whether their beloved series got the axe.

But Mo Ryan's got them all beat. What's on the line for her isn't just money or glory or a favorite TV show. It's her sanity. Because she's got to watch all the new shows. Got to. All of them. And if they all blow, her brain will be sludge by November.

Ryan, you see, is a critic: the TV reviewer of the *Chicago Tribune*. And what's more, she's a lifelong mystery fan. So if she says the new fall schedules actually look promising—and she does—that's good news indeed for couch potatoes with a taste for the criminous.

"I'm looking forward to watching this new crop of mystery shows," says Ryan (who also blogs about TV on the *Tribune* Web site). "I think the networks have at least tried to be more creative with their crime shows this year. None of them are *CSI* clones, for one thing. Nor are they *Law & Order* rip-offs."



After Katrina, the cops of K-Ville still have a big mess to clean up. © *Fox*

Which makes sense: Both venerable old warhorses are being shunted aside a bit by their respective networks. (More on that later.) Instead, Ryan's pick for most intriguing new crime show comes more from the *NYPD Blue* mold. Think of it as NOLA Blue.

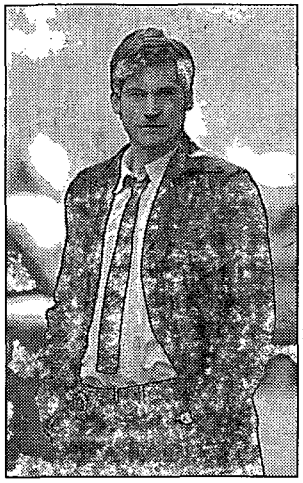
Set in New Orleans, Fox's *K-Ville* explores the chaos that still

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runs rampant in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Living in the Big Easy's anything but easy these days—especially for the town's stressed-out cops.

"I like the concept," Ryan says. "And it has Anthony Anderson as the star, and as any fan of *The Shield* knows, he's an amazing actor." (Anderson played nefarious gang leader Antwon Mitchell in the gritty FX series.)

Ryan also sees potential in another Fox drama: the *Homicide*-meets-*Highlander* mash-up *New Amsterdam*. Danish import Nikolaj Coster-Waldau stars as John Amsterdam, a jazz-loving NYPD detective with a beautiful young partner (*Rome*'s Zuleikha Robinson) and a nose for trouble. Oh, and he's four hundred years old. Seems Amsterdam was "blessed" with a Native American spell that keeps him young forever . . . as long as he doesn't fall in love.



Nikolaj Coster-Waldau. © Fox

"Hey, at least it's different," Ryan says. "But it's also on Fox, where 'different' can mean 'canceled within three weeks.' "

That's exactly the fate Ryan predicts for CBS's similar horror-mystery hybrid *Moonlight*, which features a vampire P.I. rather than an immortal cop. And Ryan thinks ABC's *Women's Murder Club* (based on James Patterson's popular series of novels) could be another early casualty.

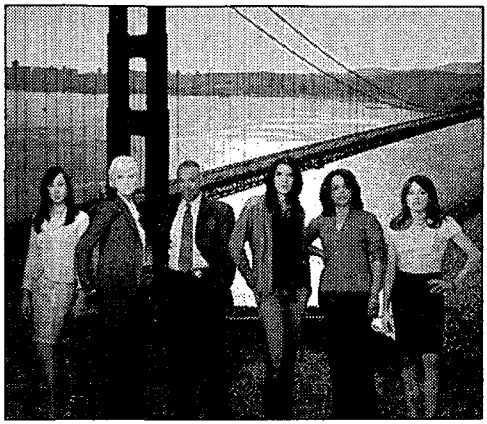
The problem for these shows isn't concept or quality. It's timing. Both have been cursed with slots in television's ratings Dead Zone: Friday nights.

"I'm always suspicious of anything the networks schedule on Fridays," Ryan says. "It sort of indicates they don't have much belief in the shows."

What the networks do seem to believe in—this year, anyway—is science fiction and the supernatural. In addition to *New Amsterdam* and *Moonlight*, you've got NBC's *Chuck* (nerd becomes *Matrix*-style spy), the CW's *Reaper* (young bounty hunter tracks escapees from Hell), and NBC's retread of the '70s "classic" *The Bionic Woman* (which might turn out to be better than the original . . . seeing as the original wasn't particularly good in the first place).

"I think (sci-fi hit) *Heroes* may have been a big influence on what got developed for fall," says Ryan. "So you're seeing a

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The cast of Women's Murder Club

lot of shows with genre elements, supernatural elements, or characters with some kind of power."

Meanwhile, the shows that used to have all the power—*CSI* and *Law & Order*—have lost some of their wattage. While all three *CSIs* will be back (along with fellow CBS crime dramas *NCIS*, *Numb3rs*, *Cold Case*, and *Without a Trace*), the network's new shows will have nary a chalk outline in sight.

"CBS has really built its resurgence on the backs of the *CSIs* and its other crime shows," Ryan says. "But it's tired of being pegged as the Criminal Behavior Showcase, so it's really dialed down its crime for fall and is trying out-there shows like *Swingtown* (about seventies wife-swappers) and *Viva Laughlin* (a pseudo-musical drama). They want to be the 'buzz' network, and that involves, in their opinion, putting on new shows that don't recall *CSI*."

Meanwhile, NBC didn't just back away from crime: It turned on its heel and ran screaming in the opposite direction. Though it added one cop drama to the schedule *(Life,* about a detective back on the force after serving time in prison for a crime he didn't commit), it dropped several others.

Crossing Jordan was canned. Midseason replacements *Raines* (the Jeff Goldblum vehicle about a detective who sees dead people) and *Andy Barker, P.I.* weren't picked up. And *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* was exiled to the USA cable network, while stodgy old *Law & Order* won't be back until January.

"The *Law & Order* franchise is certainly showing its age," Ryan says. "Really, NBC is kicking an aging veteran to the bench but not quite cutting them from the team."

So though crime dramas once played a key role in buoying network schedules—particularly for CBS and NBC—the form as a whole might be falling from favor. Not that you'll see it disappearing from your *TV Guide* anytime soon. Cop shows remain reliable ratings draws . . . when done right. They're just not trendy anymore.

"The genre's no longer the lead character, as it were," Ryan says. "But it's still a dependable supporting player."

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THE JUDGE'S HOUSE

When the time for his examination drew near Malcolm Malcolmson made up his mind to go somewhere to read by himself. He feared the attractions of the seaside, and also he feared completely rural isolation, for of old he knew its charms, and so he determined to find some unpretentious little town where there would be nothing to distract him. He refrained from asking suggestions from any of his friends, for he argued that each would recommend some place of which he had knowledge, and where he had already acquaintances. As Malcolmson wished to avoid friends he had no wish to encumber himself with the attention of friends' friends, and so he determined to look out for a place for himself. He packed a portmanteau with some clothes and all the books he required, and then took ticket for the first name on the local time-table which he did not know.

When at the end of three hours' journey he alighted at Benchurch, he felt satisfied that he had so far obliterated his tracks as to be sure of having a peaceful opportunity of pursuing his studies. He went straight to the one inn which the sleepy little place contained, and put up for the night. Benchurch was a market town, and once in three weeks was crowded to excess, but for the remainder of the twenty-one days it was as attractive as a desert. Malcolmson looked around the day after his arrival to try to find quarters more isolated than even so quiet an inn as "The Good Traveller" afforded. There was only one place which took his fancy, and it certainly satisfied his wildest ideas regarding quiet; in fact, quiet was not the proper word to apply to it—desolation was the only term conveying any suitable idea of its isolation. It was an old rambling, heavy-built house of the Jacobean style, with heavy gables and windows, unusually small, and set higher than was customary in such houses, and was surrounded with a high brick wall massively built. Indeed, on examination, it looked more like a fortified house than an ordinary dwelling. But all these things pleased

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Malcolmson. "Here," he thought, "is the very spot I have been looking for, and if I can only get opportunity of using it I shall be happy." His joy was increased when he realised beyond doubt that it was not at present inhabited.

From the post-office he got the name of the agent, who was rarely surprised at the application to rent a part of the old house. Mr. Carnford, the local lawyer and agent, was a genial old gentleman, and frankly confessed his delight at anyone being willing to live in the house.

"To tell you the truth," said he, "I should be only too happy, on behalf of the owners, to let anyone have the house rent free for a term of years if only to accustom the people here to see it inhabited. It has been so long empty that some kind of absurd prejudice has grown up about it, and this can be best put down by its occupation—if only," he added with a sly glance at Malcolmson, "by a scholar like yourself, who wants it quiet for a time."

Malcolmson thought it needless to ask the agent about the "absurd prejudice," he knew he would get more information, if he should require it, on that subject from other quarters. He paid his three months' rent, got a receipt, and the name of an old woman who would probably undertake to "do" for him, and came away with the keys in his pocket. He then went to the landlady of the inn, who was a cheerful and most kindly person, and asked her advice as to such stores and provisions as he would be likely to require. She threw up her hands in amazement when he told her where he was going to settle himself.

"Not in the Judge's House!" she said, and grew pale as she spoke. He explained the locality of the house, saying that he did not know its name. When he had finished she answered:

"Aye, sure enough—sure enough the very place! It is the Judge's House sure enough." He asked her to tell him about the place, why so called, and what there was against it. She told him that it was so called locally because it had been many years before—how long she could not say, as she was herself from another part of the country, but she thought it must have been a hundred years or more—the abode of a judge who was held in great terror on account of his harsh sentences and his hostility to prisoners at Assizes. As to what there was against the house itself she could not tell. She had often asked, but no one could inform her; but there was a general feeling that there was *something*, and for her own part she would not take all the money in Drinkwater's Bank and stay in the house an hour by herself. Then she apologised to Malcolmson for her disturbing talk.

"It is too bad of me, sir, and you—and a young gentlemen, too—

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if you will pardon me saying it, going to live there all alone. If you were my boy—and you'll excuse me for saying it—you wouldn't sleep there a night, not if I had to go there myself and pull the big alarm bell that's on the roof!" The good creature was so manifestly in earnest, and was so kindly in her intentions, that Malcolmson, although amused, was touched. He told her kindly how much he appreciated her interest in him, and added:

"But, my dear Mrs. Witham, indeed you need not be concerned about me! A man who is reading for the Mathematical Tripos has too much to think of to be disturbed by any of these mysterious 'somethings,' and his work is of too exact and prosaic a kind to allow of his having any corner in his mind for mysteries of any kind. Harmonical Progression, Permutations and Combinations, and Elliptic Functions have sufficient mysteries for me!" Mrs. Witham kindly undertook to see after his commissions, and he went himself to look for the old woman who had been recommended to him. When he returned to the Judge's House with her, after an interval of a couple of hours, he found Mrs. Witham herself waiting with several men and boys carrying parcels, and an upholsterer's man with a bed in a cart, for she said, though tables and chairs might be all very well, a bed that hadn't been aired for mayhap fifty years was not proper for young bones to lie on. She was evidently curious to see the inside of the house; and though manifestly so afraid of the "somethings" that at the slightest sound she clutched on to Malcolmson, whom she never left for a moment, went over the whole place.

After his examination of the house, Malcolmson decided to take up his abode in the great dining-room, which was big enough to serve for all his requirements; and Mrs. Witham, with the aid of the charwoman, Mrs. Dempster, proceeded to arrange matters. When the hampers were brought in and unpacked, Malcolmson saw that with much kind forethought she had sent from her own kitchen sufficient provisions to last for a few days. Before going she expressed all sorts of kind wishes; and at the door turned and said:

"And perhaps, sir, as the room is big and draughty it might be well to have one of those big screens put round your bed at night—though, truth to tell, I would die myself if I were to be so shut in with all kinds of—of 'things,' that put their heads round the sides, or over the top, and look on me!" The image which she had called up was too much for her nerves, and she fled incontinently.

Mrs. Dempster sniffed in a superior manner as the landlady disappeared, and remarked that for her own part she wasn't afraid of all the bogies in the kingdom.

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"I'll tell you what it is, sir," she said; "bogies is all kinds and sorts of things—except bogies! Rats and mice, and beetles; and creaky doors, and loose slates, and broken panes, and stiff drawer handles, that stay out when you pull them and then fall down in the middle of the night. Look at the wainscot of the room! It is old—hundreds of years old! Do you think there's no rats and beetles there! And do you imagine, sir, that you won't see none of them? Rats is bogies, I tell you, and bogies is rats; and don't you get to think anything else!"

"Mrs. Dempster," said Malcolmson gravely, making her a polite bow, "you know more than a Senior Wrangler! And let me say, that, as a mark of esteem for your indubitable soundness of head and heart, I shall, when I go, give you possession of this house, and let you stay here by yourself for the last two months of my tenancy, for four weeks will serve my purpose."

"Thank you kindly, sir!" she answered, "but I couldn't sleep away from home a night. I am in Greenhow's Charity, and if I slept a night away from my rooms I should lose all I have got to live on. The rules is very strict; and there's too many watching for a vacancy for me to run any risks in the matter. Only for that, sir, I'd gladly come here and attend on you altogether during your stay."

"My good woman," said Malcolmson hastily, "I have come here on purpose to obtain solitude; and believe me that I am grateful to the late Greenhow for having so organised his admirable charity—whatever it is—that I am perforce denied the opportunity of suffering from such a form of temptation! Saint Anthony himself could not be more rigid on the point!"

The old woman laughed harshly. "Ah, you young gentlemen," she said, "you don't fear for naught; and belike you'll get all the solitude you want here." She set to work with her cleaning; and by nightfall, when Malcolmson returned from his walk—he always had one of his books to study as he walked—he found the room swept and tidied, a fire burning in the old hearth, the lamp lit, and the table spread for supper with Mrs. Witham's excellent fare. "This is comfort, indeed," he said, as he rubbed his hands.

When he had finished his supper, and lifted the tray to the other end of the great oak dining-table, he got out his books again, put fresh wood on the fire, trimmed his lamp, and set himself down to a spell of real hard work. He went on without pause till about eleven o'clock, when he knocked off for a bit to fix his fire and lamp, and to make himself a cup of tea. He had always been a tea-drinker, and during his college life had sat late at work and had taken tea late. The rest was a great luxury to him, and he enjoyed it with a sense of delicious, voluptuous ease. The renewed fire leaped and sparkled, and threw quaint shadows through the great

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old room; and as he sipped his hot tea he revelled in the sense of isolation from his kind. Then it was that he began to notice for the first time what a noise the rats were making.

"Surely," he thought, "they cannot have been at it all the time I was reading. Had they been, I must have noticed it!" Presently, when the noise increased, he satisfied himself that it was really new. It was evident that at first the rats had been frightened at the presence of a stranger, and the light of fire and lamp; but that as the time went on they had grown bolder and were now disporting themselves as was their wont.

How busy they were! and hark to the strange noises! Up and down behind the old wainscot, over the ceiling and under the floor they raced, and gnawed, and scratched! Malcolmson smiled to himself as he recalled to mind the saying of Mrs. Dempster, "Bogies is rats, and rats is bogies!" The tea began to have its effect of intellectual and nervous stimulus, he saw with joy another long spell of work to be done before the night was past, and in the sense of security which it gave him, he allowed himself the luxury of a good look round the room. He took his lamp in one hand, and went all around, wondering that so quaint and beautiful an old house had been so long neglected. The carving of the oak on the panels of the wainscot was fine, and on and round the doors and windows it was beautiful and of rare merit. There were some old pictures on the walls, but they were coated so thick with dust and dirt that he could not distinguish any detail of them, though he held his lamp as high as he could over his head. Here and there as he went round he saw some crack or hole blocked for a moment by the face of a rat with its bright eyes glittering in the light, but in an instant it was gone, and a squeak and a scamper followed.

The thing that most struck him, however, was the rope of the great alarm bell on the roof, which hung down in a corner of the room on the right-hand side of the fireplace. He pulled up close to the hearth a great high-backed carved oak chair, and sat down to his last cup of tea. When this was done he made up the fire, and went back to his work, sitting at the corner of the table, having the fire to his left. For a while the rats disturbed him somewhat with their perpetual scampering, but he got accustomed to the noise as one does to the ticking of a clock or to the roar of moving water; and he became so immersed in his work that everything in the world, except the problem which he was trying to solve, passed away from him.

He suddenly looked up, his problem was still unsolved, and there was in the air that sense of the hour before the dawn, which

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is so dread to doubtful life. The noise of the rats had ceased. Indeed it seemed to him that it must have ceased but lately and that it was the sudden cessation which had disturbed him. The fire had fallen low, but still it threw out a deep red glow. As he looked he started in spite of his *sang froid.*

There on the great high-backed carved oak chair by the right side of the fireplace sat an enormous rat, steadily glaring at him with baleful eyes. He made a motion to it as though to hunt it away, but it did not stir. Then he made the motion of throwing something. Still it did not stir, but showed its great white teeth angrily, and its cruel eyes shone in the lamplight with an added vindictiveness.

Malcolmson felt amazed, and seizing the poker from the hearth ran at it to kill it. Before, however, he could strike it, the rat, with a squeak that sounded like the concentration of hate, jumped upon the floor, and, running up the rope of the alarm bell, disappeared in the darkness beyond the range of the green-shaded lamp. Instantly, strange to say, the noisy scampering of the rats in the wainscot began again.

By this time Malcolmson's mind was quite off the problem; and as a shrill cock-crow outside told him of the approach of morning, he went to bed and to sleep.

He slept so sound that he was not even waked by Mrs. Dempster coming in to make up his room. It was only when she had tidied up the place and got his breakfast ready and tapped on the screen which closed in his bed that he woke. He was a little tired still after his night's hard work, but a strong cup of tea soon freshened him up, and, taking his book, he went out for his morning walk, bringing with him a few sandwiches lest he should not care to return till dinner time. He found a quiet walk between high elms some way outside the town, and here he spent the greater part of the day studying his Laplace. On his return he looked in to see Mrs. Witham and to thank her for her kindness. When she saw him coming through the diamond-paned bay-window of her sanctum she came out to meet him and asked him in. She looked at him searchingly and shook her head as she said:

"You must not overdo it, sir. You are paler this morning than you should be. Too late hours and too hard work on the brain isn't good for any man! But tell me, sir, how did you pass the night? Well, I hope? But, my heart! sir, I was glad when Mrs. Dempster told me this morning that you were all right and sleeping sound when she went in."

"Oh, I was all right," he answered, smiling, "the 'somethings' didn't worry me, as yet. Only the rats; and they had a circus, I tell

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you, all over the place. There was one wicked looking old devil that sat up on my own chair by the fire, and wouldn't go till I took the poker to him, and then he ran up the rope of the alarm bell and got to somewhere up the wall or the ceiling—I couldn't see where, it was so dark."

"Mercy on us," said Mrs. Witham, "an old devil, and sitting on a chair by the fireside! Take care, sir! take care! There's many a true word spoken in jest."

"How do you mean? 'Pon my word I don't understand."

"An old devil! The old devil, perhaps. There! sir, you needn't laugh," for Malcolmson had broken into a hearty peal. "You young folks thinks it easy to laugh at things that makes older ones shudder. Never mind, sir! never mind! Please God, you'll laugh all the time. It's what I wish you myself!" and the good lady beamed all over in sympathy with his enjoyment, her fears gone for a moment.

"Oh, forgive me!" said Malcolmson presently. "Don't think me rude; but the idea was too much for me—that the old devil himself was on the chair last night!" And at the thought he laughed again. Then he went home to dinner.

This evening the scampering of the rats began earlier; indeed it had been going on before his arrival, and only ceased whilst his presence by its freshness disturbed them. After dinner he sat by the fire for a while and had a smoke; and then, having cleared his table, began to work as before. Tonight the rats disturbed him more than they had done on the previous night. How they scampered up and down and under and over! How they squeaked, and scratched, and gnawed! How they, getting bolder by degrees, came to the mouths of their holes and to the chinks and cracks and crannies in the wainscoting till their eyes shone like tiny lamps as the firelight rose and fell. But to him, now doubtless accustomed to them, their eyes were not wicked; only their playfulness touched him. Sometimes the boldest of them made sallies out on the floor or along the mouldings of the wainscot. Now and again as they disturbed him Malcolmson made a sound to frighten them, smiting the table with his hand or giving a fierce "Hsh, hsh," so that they fled straightway to their holes.

And so the early part of the night wore on; and despite the noise Malcolmson got more and more immersed in his work.

All at once he stopped, as on the previous night, being overcome by a sudden sense of silence. There was not the faintest sound of gnaw, or scratch, or squeak. The silence was as of the grave. He remembered the odd occurrence of the previous night, and instinctively he looked at the chair standing close by the fireside. And then a very odd sensation thrilled through him.

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There, on the great old high-backed carved oak chair beside the fireplace sat the same enormous rat, steadily glaring at him with baleful eyes.

Instinctively he took the nearest thing to his hand, a book of logarithms, and flung it at it. The book was badly aimed and the rat did not stir, so again the poker performance of the previous night was repeated; and again the rat, being closely pursued, fled up the rope of the alarm bell. Strangely too, the departure of this rat was instantly followed by the renewal of the noise made by the general rat community. On this occasion, as on the previous one, Malcolmson could not see at what part of the room the rat disappeared, for the green shade of his lamp left the upper part of the room in darkness, and the fire had burned low.

On looking at his watch he found it was close on midnight; and, not sorry for the *divertissement*, he made up his fire and made himself his nightly pot of tea. He had got through a good spell of work, and thought himself entitled to a cigarette; and so he sat on the great carved oak chair before the fire and enjoyed it. Whilst smoking he began to think that he would like to know where the rat disappeared to, for he had certain ideas for the morrow not entirely disconnected with a rat-trap. Accordingly he lit another lamp and placed it so that it would shine well into the right-hand corner of the wall by the fireplace. Then he got all the books he had with him, and placed them handy to throw at the vermin. Finally he lifted the rope of the alarm bell and placed the end of it on the table, fixing the extreme end under the lamp. As he handled it he could not help noticing how pliable it was, especially for so strong a rope, and one not in use. "You could hang a man with it," he thought to himself. When his preparations were made he looked around, and said complacently:

"There now, my friend, I think we shall learn something of you this time!" He began his work again, and though as before somewhat disturbed at first by the noise of the rats, soon lost himself in his propositions and problems.

Again he was called to his immediate surroundings suddenly. This time it might not have been the sudden silence only which took his attention; there was a slight movement of the rope, and the lamp moved. Without stirring, he looked to see if his pile of books was within range, and then cast his eye along the rope. As he looked he saw the great rat drop from the rope on the oak armchair and sit there glaring at him. He raised a book in his right hand, and taking careful aim, flung it at the rat. The latter, with a quick movement, sprang aside and dodged the missile. He then took another book, and a third, and flung them one after another

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at the rat, but each time unsuccessfully. At last, as he stood with a book poised in his hand to throw, the rat squeaked and seemed afraid. This made Malcolmson more than ever eager to strike, and the book flew and struck the rat a resounding blow. It gave a terrified squeak, and turning on his pursuer a look of terrible malevolence, ran up the chair-back and made a great jump to the rope of the alarm bell and ran up it like lightning. The lamp rocked under the sudden strain, but it was a heavy one and did not topple over. Malcolmson kept his eyes on the rat, and saw it by the light of the second lamp leap to a moulding of the wainscot and disappear through a hole in one of the great pictures which hung on the wall, obscured and invisible through its coating of dirt and dust.

"I shall look up my friend's habitation in the morning," said the student, as he went over to collect his books. "The third picture from the fireplace; I shall not forget." He picked up the books one by one, commenting on them as he lifted them. "*Conic Sections* he does not mind, nor *Cycloidal Oscillations*, nor the *Principia*, nor *Quaternions*, nor *Thermodynamics*. Now for the book that fetched him!" Malcolmson took it up and looked at it. As he did so he started, and a sudden pallor overspread his face. He looked round uneasily and shivered slightly, as he murmured to himself:

"The Bible my mother gave me! What an odd coincidence." He sat down to work again, and the rats in the wainscot renewed their gambols. They did not disturb him, however; somehow their presence gave him a sense of companionship. But he could not attend to his work, and after striving to master the subject on which he was engaged gave it up in despair, and went to bed as the first streak of dawn stole in through the eastern window.

He slept heavily but uneasily, and dreamed much; and when Mrs. Dempster woke him late in the morning he seemed ill at ease, and for a few minutes did not seem to realise exactly where he was. His first request rather surprised the servant.

"Mrs. Dempster, when I am out today I wish you would get the steps and dust or wash those pictures—specially that one the third from the fireplace—I want to see what they are."

Late in the afternoon Malcolmson worked at his books in the shaded walk, and the cheerfulness of the previous day came back to him as the day wore on, and he found that his reading was progressing well. He had worked out to a satisfactory conclusion all the problems which had as yet baffled him, and it was in a state of jubilation that he paid a visit to Mrs. Witham at "The Good Traveller." He found a stranger in the cosy sitting-room with the landlady, who was introduced to him as Dr. Thornhill. She was not quite at ease, and this, combined with the doctor's plunging at

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once into a series of questions, made Malcolmson come to the conclusion that his presence was not an accident, so without preliminary he said:

"Dr. Thornhill, I shall with pleasure answer you any question you may choose to ask me if you will answer me one question first."

The doctor seemed surprised, but he smiled and answered at once. "Done! What is it?"

"Did Mrs. Witham ask you to come here and see me and advise me?"

Dr. Thornhill for a moment was taken aback, and Mrs. Witham got fiery red and turned away; but the doctor was a frank and ready man, and he answered at once and openly:

"She did: but she didn't intend you to know it. I suppose it was my clumsy haste that made you suspect. She told me that she did not like the idea of your being in that house all by yourself, and that she thought you took too much strong tea. In fact, she wants me to advise you if possible to give up the tea and the very late hours. I was a keen student in my time, so I suppose I may take the liberty of a college man, and without offence, advise you not quite as a stranger."

Malcolmson with a bright smile held out his hand. "Shake! as they say in America," he said. "I must thank you for your kindness and Mrs. Witham too, and your kindness deserves a return on my part. I promise to take no more strong tea—no tea at all till you let me—and I shall go to bed tonight at one o'clock at latest. Will that do?"

"Capital," said the doctor. "Now tell us all that you noticed in the old house," and so Malcolmson then and there told in minute detail all that had happened in the last two nights. He was interrupted every now and then by some exclamation from Mrs. Witham, till finally when he told of the episode of the Bible the landlady's pent-up emotions found vent in a shriek; and it was not till a stiff glass of brandy and water had been administered that she grew composed again. Dr. Thornhill listened with a face of growing gravity, and when the narrative was complete and Mrs. Witham had been restored he asked:

"The rat always went up the rope of the alarm bell?"

"Always."

"I suppose you know," said the doctor after a pause, "what the rope is?"

"No!"

"It is," said the doctor slowly, "the very rope which the hangman used for all the victims of the Judge's judicial rancour!" Here he was interrupted by another scream from Mrs. Witham, and steps

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had to be taken for her recovery. Malcolmson having looked at his watch, and found that it was close to his dinner hour, had gone home before her complete recovery.

When Mrs. Witham was herself again she almost assailed the doctor with angry questions as to what he meant by putting such horrible ideas into the poor young man's mind. "He has quite enough there already to upset him," she added. Dr. Thornhill replied:

"My dear madam, I had a distinct purpose in it! I wanted to draw his attention to the bell rope, and to fix it there. It may be that he is in a highly overwrought state, and has been studying too much, although I am bound to say that he seems as sound and healthy a young man, mentally and bodily, as ever I saw—but then the rats—and that suggestion of the devil." The doctor shook his head and went on. "I would have offered to go and stay the first night with him but that I felt sure it would have been a cause of offence. He may get in the night some strange fright or hallucination; and if he does I want him to pull that rope. All alone as he is it will give us warning, and we may reach him in time to be of service. I shall be sitting up pretty late tonight and shall keep my ears open. Do not be alarmed if Benchurch gets a surprise before morning."

"Oh, Doctor, what do you mean? What do you mean?"

"I mean this; that possibly—nay, more probably—we shall hear the great alarm bell from the Judge's House tonight," and the doctor made about as effective an exit as could be thought of.

When Malcolmson arrived home he found that it was a little after his usual time, and Mrs. Dempster had gone away—the rules of Greenhow's Charity were not to be neglected. He was glad to see that the place was bright and tidy with a cheerful fire and a well-trimmed lamp. The evening was colder than might have been expected in April, and a heavy wind was blowing with such rapidly increasing strength that there was every promise of a storm during the night. For a few minutes after his entrance the noise of the rats ceased; but so soon as they became accustomed to his presence they began again. He was glad to hear them, for he felt once more the feeling of companionship in their noise, and his mind ran back to the strange fact that they only ceased to manifest themselves when that other—the great rat with the baleful eyes—came upon the scene. The reading-lamp only was lit and its green shade kept the ceiling and the upper part of the room in darkness, so that the cheerful light from the hearth spreading over the floor and shining on the white cloth laid over the end of the table was warm and cheery. Malcolmson sat down to his dinner with a good appetite and a buoyant spirit. After his dinner and a

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cigarette he sat steadily down to work, determined not to let anything disturb him, for he remembered his promise to the doctor, and made up his mind to make the best of the time at his disposal.

For an hour or so he worked all right, and then his thoughts began to wander from his books. The actual circumstances around him, the calls on his physical attention, and his nervous susceptibility were not to be denied. By this time the wind had become a gale, and the gale a storm. The old house, solid though it was, seemed to shake to its foundations, and the storm roared and raged through its many chimneys and its queer old gables, producing strange, unearthly sounds in the empty rooms and corridors. Even the great alarm bell on the roof must have felt the force of the wind, for the rope rose and fell slightly, as though the bell were moved a little from time to time, and the limber rope fell on the oak floor with a hard and hollow sound.

As Malcolmson listened to it he bethought himself of the doctor's words, "It is the rope which the hangman used for the victims of the Judge's judicial rancour," and he went over to the corner of the fireplace and took it in his hand to look at it. There seemed a sort of deadly interest in it, and as he stood there he lost himself for a moment in speculation as to who these victims were, and the grim wish of the Judge to have such a ghastly relic ever under his eyes. As he stood there the swaying of the bell on the roof still lifted the rope now and again; but presently there came a new sensation—a sort of tremor in the rope, as though something was moving along it.

Looking up instinctively Malcolmson saw the great rat coming slowly down towards him, glaring at him steadily. He dropped the rope and started back with a muttered curse, and the rat turning ran up the rope again and disappeared, and at the same instant Malcolmson became conscious that the noise of the rats, which had ceased for a while, began again.

All this set him thinking, and it occurred to him that he had not investigated the lair of the rat or looked at the pictures, as he had intended. He lit the other lamp without the shade, and, holding it up went and stood opposite the third picture from the fireplace on the right-hand side where he had seen the rat disappear on the previous night.

At the first glance he started back so suddenly that he almost dropped the lamp, and a deadly pallor overspread his face. His knees shook, and heavy drops of sweat came on his forehead, and he trembled like an aspen. But he was young and plucky, and pulled himself together, and after the pause of a few seconds stepped forward again, raised the lamp, and examined the picture

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which had been dusted and washed, and now stood out clearly.

It was of a judge dressed in his robes of scarlet and ermine. His face was strong and merciless, evil, crafty, and vindictive, with a sensual mouth, hooked nose of ruddy colour, and shaped like the beak of a bird of prey. The rest of the face was of a cadaverous colour. The eyes were of peculiar brilliance and with a terribly malignant expression. As he looked at them, Malcolmson grew cold, for he saw there the very counterpart of the eyes of the great rat. The lamp almost fell from his hand, he saw the rat with its baleful eyes peering out through the hole in the corner of the picture, and noted the sudden cessation of the noise of the other rats. However, he pulled himself together, and went on with his examination of the picture.

The Judge was seated in a great high-backed carved oak chair, on the right-hand side of a great stone fireplace where, in the corner, a rope hung down from the ceiling, its end lying coiled on the floor. With a feeling of something like horror, Malcolmson recognised the scene of the room as it stood, and gazed around him in an awestruck manner as though he expected to find some strange presence behind him. Then he looked over to the corner of the fireplace—and with a loud cry he let the lamp fall from his hand.

There, in the Judge's armchair, with the rope hanging behind, sat the rat with the Judge's baleful eyes, now intensified and with a fiendish leer. Save for the howling of the storm without there was silence.

The fallen lamp recalled Malcolmson to himself. Fortunately it was of metal, and so the oil was not spilt. However, the practical need of attending to it settled at once his nervous apprehensions. When he had turned it out, he wiped his brow and thought for a moment.

"This will not do," he said to himself. "If I go on like this I shall become a crazy fool. This must stop! I promised the Doctor I would not take tea. Faith, he was pretty right! My nerves must have been getting into a queer state. Funny I did not notice it. I never felt better in my life. However, it is all right now, and I shall not be such a fool again."

Then he mixed himself a good stiff glass of brandy and water and resolutely sat down to his work.

It was nearly an hour when he looked up from his book, disturbed by the sudden stillness. Without, the wind howled and roared louder than ever, and the rain drove in sheets against the windows, beating like hail on the glass; but within there was no sound whatever save the echo of the wind as it roared in the great chimney, and now and then a hiss as a few raindrops found their

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way down the chimney in a lull of the storm. The fire had fallen low and had ceased to flame, though it threw out a red glow. Malcolmson listened attentively, and presently heard a thin, squeaking noise, very faint. It came from the corner of the room where the rope hung down, and he thought it was the creaking of the rope on the floor as the swaying of the bell raised and lowered it. Looking up, however, he saw in the dim light the great rat clinging to the rope and gnawing it. The rope was already nearly gnawed through—he could see the lighter colour where the strands were laid bare. As he looked the job was completed, and the severed end of the rope fell clattering on the oaken floor, whilst for an instant the great rat remained like a knob or tassel at the end of the rope, which now began to sway to and fro. Malcolmson felt for a moment another pang of terror as he thought that now the possibility of calling the outer world to his assistance was cut off, but an intense anger took its place, and seizing the book he was reading he hurled it at the rat. The blow was well aimed, but before the missile could reach it the rat dropped off and struck the floor with a soft thud. Malcolmson instantly rushed over towards it, but it darted away and disappeared in the darkness of the shadows of the room. Malcolmson felt that his work was over for the night, and determined then and there to vary the monotony of the proceedings by a hunt for the rat, and took off the green shade of the lamp so as to insure a wider spreading light. As he did so the gloom of the upper part of the room was relieved, and in the new flood of light, great by comparison with the previous darkness, the pictures on the wall stood out boldly. From where he stood, Malcolmson saw right opposite to him the third picture on the wall from the right of the fireplace. He rubbed his eyes in surprise, and then a great fear began to come upon him.

In the centre of the picture was a great irregular patch of brown canvas, as fresh as when it was stretched on the frame. The background was as before, with chair and chimney-corner and rope, but the figure of the Judge had disappeared.

Malcolmson, almost in a chill of horror, turned slowly round, and then he began to shake and tremble like a man in a palsy. His strength seemed to have left him, and he was incapable of action or movement, hardly even of thought. He could only see and hear.

There, on the great high-backed carved oak chair sat the Judge in his robes of scarlet and ermine, with his baleful eyes glaring vindictively, and a smile of triumph on the resolute, cruel mouth, as he lifted with his hands a *black cap*. Malcolmson felt as if the blood was running from his heart, as one does in moments of pro-

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longed suspense. There was a singing in his ears. Without, he could hear the roar and howl of the tempest, and through it, swept on the storm, came the striking of midnight by the great chimes in the market place. He stood for a space of time that seemed to him endless, still as a statue and with wide-open, horror-struck eyes, breathless. As the clock struck, so the smile of triumph on the Judge's face intensified, and at the last stroke of midnight he placed the black cap on his head.

Slowly and deliberately the Judge rose from his chair and picked up the piece of rope of the alarm bell which lay on the floor, drew it through his hands as if he enjoyed its touch, and then deliberately began to knot one end of it, fashioning it into a noose. This he tightened and tested with his foot, pulling hard at it till he was satisfied and then making a running noose of it, which he held in his hand. Then he began to move along the table on the opposite side to Malcolmson, keeping his eyes on him until he had passed him, when with a quick movement he stood in front of the door. Malcolmson then began to feel that he was trapped, and tried to think of what he should do. There was some fascination in the Judge's eyes, which he never took off him, and he had, perforce, to look. He saw the Judge approach—still keeping between him and the door—and raise the noose and throw it towards him as if to entangle him. With a great effort he made a quick movement to one side, and saw the rope fall beside him, and heard it strike the oaken floor. Again the Judge raised the noose and tried to ensnare him, ever keeping his baleful eyes fixed on him, and each time by a mighty effort the student just managed to evade it. So this went on for many times, the Judge seeming never discouraged nor discomposed at failure, but playing as a cat does with a mouse. At last in despair, which had reached its climax, Malcolmson cast a quick glance round him. The lamp seemed to have blazed up, and there was a fairly good light in the room. At the many ratholes and in the chinks and crannies of the wainscot he saw the rats' eyes; and this aspect, that was purely physical, gave him a gleam of comfort. He looked around and saw that the rope of the great alarm bell was laden with rats. Every inch of it was covered with them, and more and more were pouring through the small circular hole in the ceiling whence it emerged, so that with their weight the bell was beginning to sway.

Hark! it had swayed till the clapper had touched the bell. The sound was but a tiny one, but the bell was only beginning to sway, and it would increase.

At the sound the Judge, who had been keeping his eyes fixed on Malcolmson, looked up, and a scowl of diabolical anger overspread

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his face. His eyes fairly glowed like hot coals, and he stamped his foot with a sound that seemed to make the house shake. A dreadful peal of thunder broke overhead as he raised the rope again, whilst the rats kept running up and down the rope as though working against time. This time, instead of throwing it, he drew close to his victim, and held open the noose as he approached. As he came closer there seemed something paralysing in his very presence, and Malcolmson stood rigid as a corpse. He felt the Judge's icy fingers touch his throat as he adjusted the rope. The noose tightened—tightened. Then the Judge, taking the rigid form of the student in his arms, carried him over and placed him standing in the oak chair, and stepping up beside him, put his hand up and caught the end of the swaying rope of the alarm bell. As he raised his hand the rats fled squeaking, and disappeared through the hole in the ceiling. Taking the end of the noose which was round Malcolmson's neck he tied it to the hanging-bell rope, and then descending pulled away the chair.

When the alarm bell of the Judge's House began to sound a crowd soon assembled. Lights and torches of various kinds appeared, and soon a silent crowd was hurrying to the spot. They knocked loudly at the door, but there was no reply. Then they burst in the door, and poured into the great dining-room, the doctor at the head.

There at the end of the rope of the great alarm bell hung the body of the student, and on the face of the Judge in the picture was a malignant smile.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

help want dmoqrsuvxyzbcfgijk

From "Help Wanted, Male" by Rex Stout
in Trouble in Triplicate *(1945)*

—Rex Stout

Conceit convinced me that only I could catch the person daring and witty enough to kill me. I wished to be alive to do so.

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THE STORY THAT WON

The May Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Rene Matejek of Hillsborough, New Jersey. Honorable mentions go to Barbara Blanks of Garland, Texas; Vic Cardinale of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; Garry Harding of Point Roberts, Washington; James A. Knoop of Clay, Michigan; James E. Spitzer of Rochester Hills, Michigan; and James A. Stewart of Butler, Pennsylvania.



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MIS-DIRECTIONS

RENE MATEJEK

The two thieves stand by their car, scanning the deserted cemetery. Al checks the instructions that were left for them.

"Take Hamilton Road to dead end," he reads to his partner Ron. "Pull into cemetery. Leave jewels with Jake."

"So where's Jake?" asks Ron.

"Right here," answers Al, pointing to the newest headstone. " 'Here lies Jake Nelson, Beloved Father.' I guess we leave the jewels in his coffin."

They locate some gardening equipment nearby, grab a shovel, and start digging.

John Monroe really didn't want to do any landscaping today, but since he had to be there anyway, he might as well finish the Nelson gravesite. He stops his truck on the road when he notices two men digging in the cemetery. Fearing they're grave robbers, he calls the police and waits. They cops arrive just as the two men reach the coffin. The police take the crooks into custody and recover the Crosby Diamonds.

As Al and Ron are placed into one of the police cars, an officer goes over to Monroe and explains who the men are. At hearing the news, the caretaker flies into a rage, shouting insults and obscenities at the prisoners.

"Doesn't look like he's very happy with you guys," says Sergeant Owens to his prisoners.

"Who is he anyway?" asks Al.

"He's the caretaker for this cemetery. His name is John Monroe, but everyone calls him Jake."

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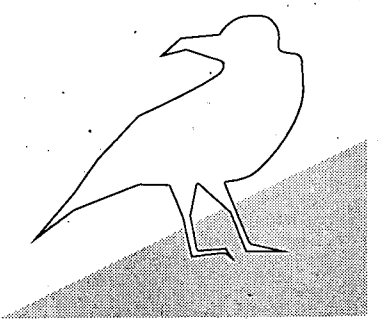
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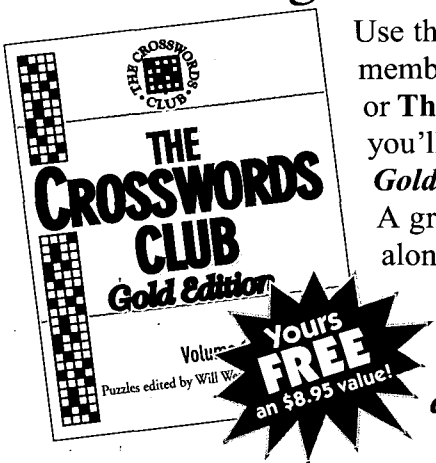


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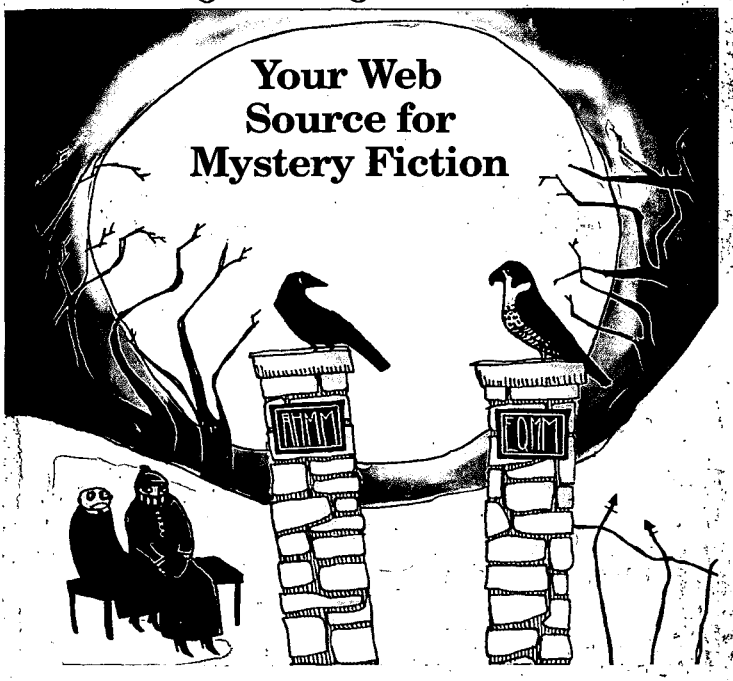
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